

## LIVING FOR THE KINGDOM

Ben Janssen | **Matthew 6:19-34** | January 3, 2021

<sup>19</sup> “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, <sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. <sup>22</sup> “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, <sup>23</sup> but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! <sup>24</sup> “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. <sup>25</sup> “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. <sup>34</sup> “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

I’m not much for tattoos, but if I were going to get one, I might get a Bible reference tattoo: Leviticus 19:28. I once heard a Christian say that this is what he did. It would be quite the conversation starter; for if someone were to look it up, they would find these words: “You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the Lord.”

I don’t know if you have what you might call a life verse, but if you’re looking for one, a verse you might even tattoo on your body, I can’t think of a better verse than Matthew 6:33. Here we find Jesus calling his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). Could there be a more Christian resolution for every New Year than this one? Jesus says that the kingdom of God is to take the top priority of our lives. And this is one of those verses that comes with a tremendous promise. It’s like when Jesus says, “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (Jn 14:14). Here he says that if indeed the kingdom of God occupies that top priority, we will have no need to worry about having our basic needs met.

My aim this morning is to encourage us to believe this call of Jesus, complete with all he promises us in it, and so to joyfully live according to this call in the year before us. The distinctive of the Christian life is that it is to be lived under the authority of God and with the privileges of his kingdom.

To do that, we will of course need to understand a bit more what this call entails. What does it mean to seek first the kingdom of God, how do we go about doing it, and what are the rewards that come from doing so?

## THE PURSUIT OF THE KINGDOM

What does it mean to “seek” the kingdom of God? It means not only that we should desire God’s kingdom, that we should hope for it, long for it, wish for it. It also means that we are to “devote serious effort” to seeing that desire come to pass.<sup>1</sup> If you and I are going to “seek first the kingdom of God” then it will require us to do something. What might that be? Here in Matthew 6, we find two ways to understand what it means for us to seek the kingdom of God.

### Doing God’s Will

Look back at the Lord’s prayer, starting in verse 9. When Jesus instructs his disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come,” he follows it with the words, “your will be done.” This is interesting because in Luke version of the prayer, we only find the words “your kingdom come” (Lk 11:2). Did Luke forget the next petition in the Lord’s prayer? No, rather we should understand the doing of God’s will to be the manifestation of the kingdom coming.

The kingdom of God refers to the rule of God. The kingdom of God is God’s “sovereignty in action.”<sup>2</sup> God is and always has been sovereign over everything, but according to the sovereign plan of God, his will is not yet done on earth, not “just as it is in heaven” anyway.

The Bible explains this clearly. Because the king of God’s kingdom, Messiah Jesus, must come twice, the kingdom also comes twice.<sup>3</sup> We live in the time between the times, the time in which the kingdom has already come but has not yet fully come. So we are to pray for that day when the kingdom comes in its fullness, but we are also to live every day in the kingdom that has already come.

So that means that as citizens of the kingdom of God, we are to live like it. The world may not “do” God’s will, but his citizens can and must. That is what it means to seek the kingdom of God. What matters most to the king of this kingdom is the making of disciples, citizens of God’s kingdom who will know the king, love the king, and obey the king no matter what cost.<sup>4</sup> That is to be our top priority. Nothing is more important to Jesus; nothing should be more important to you and me.

### Practicing God’s Righteousness

Matthew gives us a second way of understanding the kingdom we are to be seeking, right here in verse 33. When Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” he does not mean, “First, seek the kingdom of God, and second, seek God’s righteousness.” Again, Luke simply says “seek his kingdom” (Lk 12:31). The kingdom of God that we are to seek is the righteousness of God.

God’s righteousness is his justice, fairness, the quality of being ethically and morally right. Now the Bible makes it very clear that only God is righteous; none of us are (Rom 3:10). There is simply no way we can be or become righteous as God is righteous by any deed or effort on our part (Rom 3:20). Nevertheless, we can indeed be righteous, for the righteousness of God is given by grace through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe in him (Rom 3:21-26).

But here the kingdom of God that we are to seek, this righteousness of God which we are to pursue, is not this righteousness which is ours solely through faith in Christ, what we would call justification. In this context, the righteousness of God is practical righteousness, what we would call sanctification. When Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” he is telling all his disciples that what must occupy our ambition and desire and work and efforts day by day is the goal of being in complete submission to God’s rule, to God’s will.<sup>5</sup>

Now if none of us are righteous by our deeds and efforts, then how can we seek to be fully submitted to God’s will? Is this an ambition that is doomed to fail from the start? Jesus would not be calling us to live like this if he did not think it was possible.

The answer is that it is the imputed righteousness of God through faith in Christ that makes it possible. Or, another way of saying it is that it is because Christ has come and brought with him the kingdom of God, that it is now possible for us to live as citizens of that kingdom. It is now possible for us to live under the rule and reign of God on earth just like it is in heaven. We don’t have to wait for the Second Coming of Christ; the kingdom is already here. And if you belong to Christ, if you trust in Christ, then you have become one of its citizens, complete with the power you need to live worthy of the kingdom you’ve been given (1 Thess 2:12).

We are not called to “seek” the kingdom as if it has not yet come, but to “seek” the kingdom precisely because it has already come. The call to seek first the kingdom of God, that is, to seek to live according to the righteous will and way of God, is to be our top priority as believers in Jesus. We should live with expectation that our seeking will be met by our finding. The kingdom has come; it was God’s good pleasure to give it to us (Lk 12:32). So now, go live with the expectation of experiencing kingdom realities in your life and in this world.

## **THE DISCIPLINES OF THE KINGDOM**

Now if we are going to pursue the kingdom of God, what ought that to look like in the daily life of the Christian? If we are going to strive to do God’s will, how do we get started?

### **Spiritual Disciplines**

At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus instructs the believers in how they are to practice righteousness (Matt 6:1). He speaks of how they are to give to the needy (vv. 2-4), how they are to pray (vv. 5-15), and how they are to fast (vv. 16-18). These are three common religious practices. They are not unique to Christianity; they comprise three of the five pillars of Islam.

But Jesus expects his disciples to do them, too, and he calls them the practice of righteousness. We often call these and other activities like them spiritual disciplines. But Jesus’s name for them shows us that doing them is exactly how we are to seek the kingdom of God.

Now Jesus warns us about engaging in spiritual disciplines “in order to be seen” by other people. We must check our motives for why we are doing religious duties and disciplines. We must not do them to be seen and praised and admired by other people. That’s what hypocrites do, Jesus says,

and we should not be like them. You've seen hypocrites before. Nobody aspires to be one, and Jesus doesn't want you to be one either.

But it's ironic that some Christians, in order to avoid being a hypocrite—we seem to prefer calling them legalists—simply avoid the spiritual disciplines altogether. Choosing to avoid spiritual disciplines so that you aren't a legalist is not any better.

## **Spiritual Priorities**

The spiritual disciplines are a gift, a grace to help us maintain spiritual priorities. Oh how important it is for disciples of Jesus to understand this!

When Jesus says in verse 19, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth," and then tells us instead to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," how in the world are we going to do that? When Jesus says in verse 24 that it is impossible to serve God and money, how are we supposed to know which one we are devoted to? I don't know that I've ever met a Christian who says, "I choose money over God," and yet Jesus would not be making statements like this if the love of money is not just as tempting for disciples of Jesus as legalism and hypocrisy.

The spiritual disciplines are a grace to help us maintain kingdom priorities. In verses 19-24 Jesus uses three sayings (about your treasure, your eyes, and the master you serve) to help his followers stay single-minded. As one commentator summarizes Jesus's point here, "Disciples, as subjects of God's kingship, are totally committed to his service, and must allow no other concerns to distract them from this prior aim."<sup>6</sup>

One day, when the kingdom of God has come in its fullness, when Messiah comes again, there will be no danger of distraction. We look forward to the arrival of that day. But for us who are in Christ, the kingdom of God has come already. This is good news. Liberating news. We are not to remain single-minded *or else*. These are not words meant to threaten us; these are words meant to free us.

## **THE REWARDS OF THE KINGDOM**

Jesus does not tell us to seek first the kingdom of God so that we do not go to hell. He tells us to seek first the kingdom of God because it is rewarding. Life under his lordship, to be a subject of the king, brings rich rewards. And because the kingdom has come, we can experience so many of those rewards now. That's why we should seek the kingdom.

### **The Reward in Secret**

So when you engage in spiritual disciplines, Jesus says, watch out for the temptation of doing them in order to be praised by others. The motive of being praised by others is so short lived. If what you want is other people to think of you as holy—or disciplined, organized, and having your life together—you can have it. But it won't satisfy.

But here's what will satisfy. When you engage in these spiritual disciplines for no other reason than simply because God is there, and he is worth knowing, then you will be rewarded by the Father

who sees in secret. Citizens of the kingdom of God will practice the spiritual disciplines because they understand them to be a means to an end, and the reward they desire is relationship with God himself, through Jesus the Messiah, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The end they are after is, as one person put it, “to spend every waking moment in the conscious enjoyment of Jesus’ company, to spend our entire lives with the most loving, joyful, peaceful person to ever live.”<sup>7</sup>

That’s why citizens of the kingdom seek the kingdom. That’s why they “practice their religion.” It’s because God himself is the treasure they are enjoying with every penny they give to the needy and with every prayer they offer in his name. You don’t have to wait for heaven to meet with God. You don’t have to go to Jerusalem to get close to Jesus. Because the kingdom has come, because the Holy Spirit has been poured out to all who are in Christ, you can enjoy fellowship with the Triune God now, day by day, moment by moment.

## **Heavenly Treasures**

I am aware that we all stumble over the spiritual disciplines in many ways. Perhaps you say, “I want to practice my faith. I want to be disciplined, but I just can’t seem to develop the habit.” Or, “I just can’t enjoy reading my Bible. I don’t get anything out of it, and God feels distant. What now?”

Without getting bogged down here, I simply want to point us to the principle Jesus lays out in verse 21. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Our heart will not be fully “in it” until our treasure is laid up for us elsewhere. This is going to take some time.

The Apostle Paul gives us a commentary on this teaching of Jesus in 1 Timothy 6. Take a look at what he says. He tells Timothy to charge “the rich in this present age” to not be arrogant or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches. Any of us who come into contact with any discretionary income need to be careful about the deceitfulness of riches. And what he says is not that we must never spend money on things we might like to have, but rather to recognize that it is God himself “who richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (v. 17). Life in the kingdom is not about a vow of poverty, though indeed God may call some to sell everything they have and give it to the poor, for that is one way you may lay up your treasure in heaven (Lk 18:22). Life in the kingdom also includes enjoying this rich and interesting world that God has made. The God of the Bible is not stingy with the pleasures he created in this universe.

But the reason he has given to some more than others is so that they might “do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.” Notice that this is how we may store up treasure for ourselves “as a good foundation for the future” and thereby “take hold of that which is truly life” (vv. 18-19). A world in which people live under the kingship of Messiah is a world that is not lacking in provision but one in which there is enough for everyone to share. “Treasures,” not scarcity. That is the life of the kingdom.

## **No More Worries**

What would that kind of a world look like? It would certainly be a world in which there is no worry about the basic necessities. And Jesus says in our passage this morning that we who are his people can live in such a world if we “seek first the kingdom of God.

How can Jesus say, “do not be anxious”? To say that seems to be the equivalent of saying, “Don’t be sick.” To feel anxious seems to be a condition rather than a moral choice, doesn’t it? And is it really true that if we do indeed seek first God’s kingdom, then we do not have to worry because all the things we need will be granted to us? Aren’t there many Christians in this world whose suffering and poverty seems to prove Jesus wrong?

These are difficult questions to answer, and I do not wish to minimize the clinical realities of anxiety. But it seems we should read the promise of verse 33 in light of other passages which “presuppose the sharing of goods within the Christian community.”<sup>8</sup> As one commentator has observed, “When God’s people corporately seek first his priorities, they will by definition take care of the needy in their fellowships.”<sup>9</sup> The testimony of the early church shows that this is true (Acts 4:34).

In other words, life in the kingdom of God now involves, as it of course will also in the future, life with God *and* with his people. What an amazing privilege is ours as God’s people now to experience so many of the blessings of his kingdom that has now come.

So let us together now, at the start of this New Year, resolve once more as a church under the authority of King Jesus to “seek first the kingdom of God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), [428](#).

<sup>2</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), [24](#).

<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, electronic edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), comment on [Mark 1:14-15](#).

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, “The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Matthew and Revelation,” *The Kingdom of God, Theology in Community*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), [122-23](#).

<sup>5</sup> D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), [182](#).

<sup>6</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), [257](#).

<sup>7</sup> John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, *The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), [126](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Ibid.](#)