

Christ Alone Empowers Us for Kingdom Living (Part One)

Last week I made the statement that while the concept of kings and kingdoms may feel foreign to us, and far removed from our everyday life, the opposite is true: everything ultimately comes down to kingdom.

- Centrality of kingdom in history
- Centrality of kingdom in the gospel
- We began to look at the centrality of kingdom in our everyday lives

That's where we pick up this morning.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

¹⁶ Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. Mark 1:14-20

Notice that Jesus immediately transitions from the massive proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand to the very personal invitation to ordinary people to be a part of that kingdom by following him.

Simon and Andrew and James and John were doing what they do: mending nets and fishing for their livelihood when Jesus called them to live for something infinitely bigger. Jesus says, instead of catching fish, follow me and you will catch men and women for the kingdom.

Without wanting to oversimplify it, I think it could be said that Jesus came to do two things: to make it possible for us to enter the kingdom of God, and make it possible for the kingdom of God to enter us. Jesus did the first through his atoning work on the cross.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Col. 1:13-14

He *has* delivered us. Not He *will* deliver us, but He *has* delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Verse 14 tells us he did this by redeeming and forgiving us of our sins. Our visa for exiting the kingdom of darkness and entering the kingdom of Christ is forgiveness through Christ.

By the way, if you haven't placed your faith in Jesus Christ yet, I urge you to believe in him today! Jesus died on the cross to provide you an escape from death and a visa into eternal life. The Bible says he is the only way – so trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior today and he will give you the gift of eternal life. Because he loves you. That's the big truth of the Bible: Jesus loves you enough to die for you. Receive that love by faith and turn your life over to him and you will enter the kingdom.

By virtue of faith in Christ we are in the kingdom of God. One day we will see and enter the fullness of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, but we are in his kingdom right now. The struggle, the daily battle, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, is getting the kingdom of God in us!

The ongoing process of going from worldly living to kingdom living.

The crown of thorns

Remember how I said that whatever is going on in our lives right now is about kingdom? Whatever problems you are facing are kingdom problems. Whatever challenges you are dealing with are kingdom challenges. Whatever dreams you are pursuing are kingdom dreams? Let me explain this with a powerful picture found, of all places, in the crown of thorns that the soldiers pressed onto Jesus' head.

The soldiers meant it as a way of mocking Jesus' claim to be a king, but there is a far deeper meaning to the crown of thorns.

When Adam decided to throw off God's rule and be the ruler of his own life by taking the forbidden fruit God condemned him to a barren, thorny labor:

cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; Gen 3:17-18

That curse symbolizes what life under sin will look like. The crown of thorns represents what our lives look like, and what our lives produce, when we are the kings of our lives. We wear a crown, but it's a cursed crown. Over and over again sin promises that if we throw off God's will and do what we want, it will lead us to a lush garden of good things but over and over again what sin delivers is a barren wasteland of thorns. And we keep falling for it! When we rule our lives everything we touch turns to thorns. All our gardens bear thorns and thistles.

Maybe this morning you're looking at some of the gardens in your life and wondering how did things get so bad? How did things go so wrong? Maybe your finances are so messed up you don't know how to begin straightening them out. Maybe you're struggling with relationships that have grown thorny.

All of us have gardens that for all our efforts are growing more thorns and thistles than good fruit.

Here's what I hope this morning. I hope the Lord stirs up fresh faith in our hearts, that increasingly we can live kingdom lives. Jesus has given us His Spirit Who empowers us to live kingdom lives and the more of our lives we turn over to him, the more we see the thorns and thistles turn into good fruit. The good news of the kingdom is that Jesus not only came to get us into the kingdom, he came to get the kingdom into us.

Let's break kingdom living into three categories. They're all connected, they all overlap, but for the sake of simplicity let's consider kingdom living in three categories:

1. Kingdom Leading
2. Kingdom Character
3. Kingdom Power and Priorities

We're only going to get through the first point this morning.

1. Kingdom Leading

Now don't stop listening if you don't think you're called to lead. When we think of leading in a conventional way not everyone is called to lead or be a leader. It's good to be honest about that.

That makes me think of the story of a young woman who was applying for a college when she came to a question on the application that asked, "are you a leader?" Being an honest person, she answered, "no" even though she knew it might hurt her chances of being accepted. To her surprise, she received a letter

from the college saying: *"Dear Applicant: A review of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."*

Some people are leaders and some people aren't. But on a deeper level, ruling and governing is built into all of us – built into our DNA. We see back in Gen 1 that God created men and women with two distinct features: God created mankind in His image, and God created mankind to rule and have dominion over the earth. Governing is in our DNA. All of us.

We all lead something. You lead something. If nothing else, we lead our lives. We all govern our lives (to some extent – there are, of course, outside influences on our lives that we can't control).

Many of the thorns in our lives come from how we govern our lives. Let me share a couple examples and maybe you'll see yourself in one of them. And that's ok. This isn't about judging or condemning or embarrassing, it's about us getting honest with God so He can help us reorder our lives, re-govern our lives, according to the Kingdom of God.

Garden #1 - If your finances are a mess, it's possible that it happened by circumstances entirely out of your control, but for most of us, it's the result of poor decisions, poor choices, poor stewardship. In other words, poor governing.

Garden # 2- If life often feels like it's spiraling out of control, if you feel like you're like Indiana Jones running for your life with a massive boulder rolling after you about to crush you, again, it might be circumstances beyond your control, but if it's a pattern we need to be honest and admit that it's probably a governing problem.

Garden #3 - If you're undependable, late for things, say you'll do something and then don't, you might have an excuse for each and every incident but excuses aren't a substitute for good governing. We need to be honest and admit there's a gap between our intentions and our faithfulness and that gap is probably a governing problem.

Garden #4 - If life is kind of falling apart little by little around you, not in one big explosion but in incremental erosions, if you are putting off or avoiding the things you know you should do, but don't want to do, it's a leadership issue. You're not leading your life well.

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, ³¹ and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. ³² Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. ³³ A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ³⁴ and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. Prov. 24:30-34

This is a vivid description of someone who isn't doing what he or she needs to be doing to keep their lives from getting overgrown with thorns and thistles, and incremental erosion becomes sudden loss: *like a robber and like an armed man.*

Garden #5 - Maybe you're an expert at putting off making decisions. We can be so afraid of making the wrong decision that we don't make a decision which in itself is a decision but usually not the right one.

Even our relationships are gardens that reflect how we manage them. What do we sow into our relationships? Love, kindness, patience? Or criticism, selfishness, unkindness? Do we view relationships as something to be carefully tended, or controlled? Pursued, or avoided?

Here's the good news: we can do some – or all – of these things poorly. We can have made a royal mess out of our lives, but Jesus can help us change that. Jesus came to wear the thorny crown of our terrible self-rule so that we can take off that crown and put on the crown of life, and rule and reign in life through the power of the Holy Spirit. So that we increasingly lead our lives under the rulership of God, which is what we were created for, and what we long most for.

Jesus said, the kingdom of God is at hand, and then he said, *follow me*. Leading our lives well begins with following Jesus well. It's been said that a person can't be a good leader until they learn to be a good follower. Show me someone who doesn't like to be led, doesn't like to be told what to do, who chafes under authority, and I'll show you someone who will be a bad leader who will abuse authority if they get it. As Christians, we can't govern our lives well if we don't follow Jesus well. Kingdom living comes down to following Jesus.

But following Jesus doesn't mean we no longer have any control over our lives and actions. We still have responsibility to lead, only we do it under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is in you and ready to empower you for kingdom living. Following Jesus means taking Spirit-empowered initiative.

a. *take the initiative to obey*

When you think about it, follow me is a command. It's Jesus' call to obey him, not from a distance but in close relationship with him. We can't obey without the Spirit's enabling us to obey, but that's exactly what the Holy Spirit does – He gives us the power to live differently, to obey Jesus.

Obedying isn't passive, it's active. It's something we need to *do*. Jesus getting us into the kingdom – we had nothing to do with that except believing in Jesus. We don't get into the kingdom by obeying, except to obey the command to believe in Jesus. But Jesus getting the kingdom into us – that we do have a part in. That calls for initiative to obey. Asking every day how the kingdom of God calls us to handle our finances, work our jobs, care for our responsibilities, relate to people. Asking where does the kingdom call for me to live differently? And then taking initiative to obey the answer.

b. *take the initiative to serve*

Jesus' leadership is marked by servanthood. It's how he rules, by serving those he rules, by laying down his life for his subjects. He's a great King!

In John chapter 13 Jesus stooped to wash his disciple's feet and then he said, I want you to do the same for each other. Serve each other.

When we think of words like ruling, governing, leading, we might think of someone who barks out orders and everyone does what they say. The Kingdom calls for a different kind of ruling, leading. Leading our lives into a life of serving others.

The flesh wants to be served. I know from personal experience that when I let my life drift, it doesn't drift into serving others. It drifts into selfishness. It drifts into consuming. We need to take the initiative to break the patterns of self-absorption and care for others. It's a daily choice.

The Holy Spirit will gently press you towards opportunities to serve others and serve kingdom purposes. Take the initiative to seize those opportunities!

Let me put in a shameless plug for the church at this point. We are in a transition time, especially with COVID-19 but also with some people moving, some people unable to be here and some people

changing the ministries they're involved in, and new people coming in! Please be prayerful and open to serving here as needs are made known.

c. take the initiative to change

The kingdom of God is a change agent in our lives, but we have an active part. Is there a garden, an area of your life that is getting taken over with thorns? Some area where you have been convicted, even as I've been speaking, that you're wearing the crown and it's getting thorny. The Holy Spirit is working on your heart and gently inviting you to put the crown down and let Jesus have control.

Here's the balance we always need to keep in mind. It's not something we can do apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. But it's not something He will do apart from our cooperation. Jesus gets us into the kingdom apart from our efforts but getting the kingdom into us takes effort on our part.

Let God's word provide the direction for change. Let the Holy Spirit provide the power to change. Let the realization that there needs to be change, that you're ready for a change, be the catalyst for change. Then trust the Spirit is doing His kingdom work in you and take the initiative to change.

God will meet you. You'll be encouraged by what God does! The more the kingdom has of us, the more the kingdom gets in us, the better our lives are. The richer, fuller, more fulfilled our lives become. Jesus didn't come to ruin your life. The kingdom doesn't mess up your life. That's what we do when we are our own kings. Jesus came to give us life and that more abundantly.

Let's go for that abundant life by following Jesus into kingdom living!