

Life in the Kingdom: What is the Gospel anyway?

Mark 1:14-15

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I'd like to start today with a question. It is one question, but I'll ask it in two ways. The question is: If you had to sum up Jesus' entire ministry in one word what would it be? Or perhaps, what did Jesus spend most of His time teaching about?

I know it's a big question but I'll give you a second; lean over to the person beside you and with one word try to sum up Jesus' ministry.

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It's not an easy task to boil everything Jesus taught down to a single word because there is so much meat in what He presented, but I do believe there is a right answer to the question of what Jesus was about because Jesus seemed to think there was.

But when it comes to this there is something interesting that happens in church and that is that every week we get a snapshot into a different passage of scripture and unless you are consuming large portions of the Bible at some other time, like say in your devotions, it is easy to miss the forest for all the trees.

And the central point of Jesus' teaching is quite possibly the biggest forest that often gets missed. So, for example, many people find it surprising that Jesus talked more about money than about eternal life or either heaven or hell.

11 of Jesus' 37 parables revolved around or are connected to money. What this means is that it matters to Jesus what we do with our money. And certainly this is true when you speak to a room full of some of the wealthiest people on earth like we have here.

But even more surprising is that Jesus actually talked more about money than He talked about love. Love was probably the word you used earlier to sum up the ministry of Jesus. But while love is incredibly important to Jesus it isn't the main thing He is about. But neither is money.

And so the series we are starting today won't specifically be about love, though we will touch on that, and it won't specifically be about money, though we will touch on that as well, but instead we will use this series to look at the one topic that Jesus spent more time and passion talking about than anything else.

So 24 of His 37 parables to teach about this. The Sermon on the Mount is all about this. Jesus itinerate preaching ministry was focused on this, and in fact Matthew, Mark and Luke sum Jesus' entire ministry up with this one idea.

And that idea is the good news, or the gospel, that the kingdom of God coming near. So “kingdom” is the one word Jesus spent more energy and passion unpacking than anything else. If you used kingdom to sum up Jesus’ ministry then you win two points – pat yourself on the back. As an aside if you used the phrase “glory of God” you also get 2 points, but interestingly that idea is wrapped up in the kingdom for Jesus. If you used the word “gospel” to sum up Jesus’ ministry that would be a close second, because, as we will see Jesus tied these two ideas together. But the kingdom was central for Jesus.

So most of Jesus’ parables were about the kingdom. Here’s a few of them: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field”, and “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into... flour until it worked all through the dough”, and “the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it he went and sold all he had and bought the field.” You are all very familiar with these sayings. But Jesus’ other teaching was about the kingdom too. So the very first verse in the Sermon on the Mount reads:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:3)

And then when Jesus’ disciples asked Him to teach them to pray He said:
When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come. (Luke 11:2)

And when talking about the priorities of our lives, what we should care about, and what it looks like to live a life to God’s glory Jesus said:

But seek first [God’s] kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

And at the end of Jesus’ ministry when He was being questioned by Pilot Jesus responded:

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest.... My kingdom is from another place." (John 18:36)

So to read the Gospels and miss the centrality of the kingdom would be a huge mistake, and yet, I think in part, this is what we’ve done. We’ve focused on love and salvation and going to heaven when we die – all good things – but there hasn’t been all that much focus on the kingdom Jesus spoke about. And I’m just thinking about all the preaching I’ve heard.

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So that’s where we are going over the next several weeks, and what I want to do today is unpack what Jesus meant by the good news or the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Now “gospel”, as you know, comes from the Greek word “*euangelion*” which literally means “good tidings” or “good news.” And really it is used in two ways in scripture. So first it is used as a title to describe Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. These four books are the Gospels. But the reason they are known as Gospels is that they contain what Jesus referred to as “the gospel.” The Gospels contain the gospel.

Now Jesus didn’t make this word up, it was just the best idea in His culture for describing what He wanted to talk about. So in first century Rome if you spoke of *euangelion* you were primarily talking about news of military victory. And here it is important to make a distinction between teaching information and preaching – because this is why Jesus used this word. *Euangelion* was always more than simply transferring information.

So if you were at war, and you were a woman or a child or an elderly person you would be at home in the city, nervous and concerned, while your men were out at battle. And if your men would win a preacher, or a town crier, would come running back from the field passionately proclaiming *euangelion!* Good news! You’re not going to die! You’re not going to become slaves. We won!

And tears would flow, and people would dance and sing and hug strangers and throw their kids into the air – maybe you’ve seen pictures of the V-Day celebrations at the end of World War 2. News like this could never be given without emotion because *euangelion*, good news, gospel, was information that changed everything for the better.

But notice that the word “gospel” has no content in and of itself; rather it just lets us know that incredible content is coming. So the content of the *euangelion* for the town crier was that the battle had been won, and Jesus uses this word in a similar manner, namely to describe the central idea that He is excited about – and that is that the kingdom of God has come near – that’s the gospel.

But here I think there is a bit of surprise in store for us church goers, because for the last 64 years, since 1952¹, when the Evangelical community has talked about “spreading the gospel” what we have primarily meant is the promise of salvation from sin and eternal life. So Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade summed this up in a tract he titled “the Four Spiritual Laws”. And you’re probably familiar with this. He said that at the center of Christianity were 4 ideas:

- 1.) God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life
- 2.) But People are sinful and separated from God and His wonderful plan.
- 3.) And so we need Jesus Christ who is God’s provision for our sin.

¹ Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ International is credited with writing the “Four Spiritual Laws” as an evangelistic tool for explaining how to begin a relationship with God.

- 4.) And in order to experience God's love and plan for our lives and especially so that we can go to heaven when we die we must receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Now none of these statements are false, but the problem comes when we attach the word "gospel" to them. And that's because the word "gospel" comes from Jesus. It is the word He used. And He never used the word "gospel" to talk about these four things.

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It's like if I told you I drive a Porsche 911. And then you said "What's it like?" And I said it's got room for 4 car seats, sliding doors on either side; you can pile six suitcases in the hatch back if necessary. And it has a top speed of about 130Km/h – maybe 140 down hill. What do you think of my Porsche?

You'd say "It's a problem for you to use "Porsche" to describe your Dodge Caravan" because the word "Porsche" already has meaning attached to it, and it is nothing like what you drive. Words matter.

And in the same way it's a problem for us to use Jesus' word "gospel", to describe something He never used it to describe.

Now to be fair, after the Resurrection Paul used the word "gospel" as shorthand for summing up all of Christ's life. And certainly after Jesus had died for our sin and risen again buying us the right to spend eternity with God this had to be included in the message. But to refer to the gospel and leave out everything Jesus taught about the kingdom would be a mistake. Really Jesus' death and resurrection aren't the fullness of the gospel; they are the crowning jewel on top of everything He preached about the kingdom.

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So what was Jesus' gospel? Jesus' gospel – the good news that Jesus was crying out about – was that the kingdom of God had come near. And this message appears throughout Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and is what we will be unpacking over the next several weeks.

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So, if you haven't already, please open your Bibles to Mark chapter 1. This is on page 707 if you are looking in a pew Bible. Please do open up and follow along. Mark is the second "Gospel" in the New Testament; the second book about the gospel of Jesus Christ. And Mark starts His Gospel with these words:

The beginning of the **good news** about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

So everything in Mark's Gospel is about Jesus' gospel. And then in verse 14 and 15, which is our text today, we get the first recorded words of Jesus in Mark. Please look there with me now:

[Read Mark 1:14-15]

This is how Mark sums up Jesus' entire ministry – He went into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God. That's the *euangelion*. And then in verse 15 Jesus tells us what that good news is.

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And Jesus says the good news is that “the kingdom of God has come near.” That's it. Jesus thought the approaching kingdom was news equivalent to victory after the Nazis' defeat. It was news worth preaching!

And this is Jesus' main message. He never moves past this. And that's why if you were asked to pick one verse to sum up everything Jesus was about you could make a really good argument for using verse 15: “The time has come.... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

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Now establishing this – that the arrival of the kingdom is the gospel – is the easy part – Jesus just lays it out. But it is at this point that the difficulty starts. And that's because if this verse was enough to give the full message that Jesus had come to bring, then His three year ministry could have been shortened to a day. The High Priests could have just come and crucified Jesus right after He said this and set the rest of history in motion.

But this isn't what happened. Instead what Jesus did was spend the next three years fleshing out what God's kingdom is, and why its arrival is good news. And it took 3 years because the kingdom is a huge concept. And there are lots of aspects to it that need unpacking. So let me address two misconceptions about the kingdom that are fairly widespread.

The first misconception of the kingdom is that Jesus used the parables to make it clear so people could understand what it was – kind of the way a preacher uses illustrations to clarify his point. Most people think this is what Jesus used the parables for, but if you read them you see that actually Jesus didn't do this at all. So in Mark 4 we read:

When He was alone, the Twelve and the others around Him asked Him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,

“they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” (Mark 4:10-12)

Get your mind around this, Jesus told stories about the kingdom to keep some people out of it rather than so that everyone would understand it! Now the main reason for this was that Jesus knew His message was going to attract conflict, and He wasn't afraid of this. But neither was He going to die for it before His time. We will flesh this out a bit more over the next few weeks.

But this leads to the second misconception, and that is that the kingdom is a mystery that can't really be nailed down. And this is probably why we prefer things like the "Four Spiritual Laws" because they are lot easier to explain than the kingdom.

But while Jesus does use the word "mystery" in reference to the kingdom, it's only a mystery to those who are perishing, not to God's children. So we read:

The disciples came to Him and asked, "Why do You speak to the people in parables?" Jesus replied, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. (Matthew 13:10-11 NASB)

So Jesus intended for the kingdom to be clear to His disciples. He's unpacked it for us. We've been granted entrance into His inner circle as it were. Now this doesn't mean the kingdom is simple – it's not – it's complex, but it is graspable. And that is what we are going to give this series to unpacking.

So with that as an introduction I'd like to look at the three things Jesus says in verse 15, and by putting them together come up with a working understanding of what the good news of the kingdom was for Jesus.

So the first thing Jesus says is "The time has come."

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Now what does this mean?

Well, quite simply the Old Testament expectation was that a time was coming when God's will would be carried out on earth like it is in heaven. In heaven we can assume God's will is always carried out perfectly. So God gets to choose the music in the throne room – right? And when He asks His angels to build some new mansions they never tell Him they are too busy to get on it. God's will happens in heaven. But the Old Testament prophets foretold that one day the Messiah would come and the hearts of people would be changed so that we would carry out His will on earth.

So Isaiah said:

The LORD Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders – with great glory. (Isaiah 24:23)

God's reign will be felt on earth. And in Jeremiah we read:

The days are coming," declares the LORD,
 "when I will make a new covenant
 with the people of Israel...
 I will put My law in their minds
 and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

So a time was coming when God's rule would be extended from heaven to earth. And that rule is God's kingdom. A kingdom refers to the full area in which a person's influence is felt – that's their kingdom.

So my kingdom includes the lawn mower and occasionally the lives of four little revolutionaries; but God's kingdom includes all of heaven and everywhere on earth that men and women are living their lives to His glory – that's His kingdom. And Jesus preached that the time had come when God would transform our hearts so that God's kingdom could come to earth. This is what Jesus was all about. This is why the main thing Jesus taught us to pray was:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:9-10)

And as Jesus begins His ministry He says now that time has come...

The second thing Jesus says is "The kingdom of God has come near."

Now when Jesus spoke like this lots of expectations were raised in people's minds. Remember that the Jews were an oppressed people at this time. They were living under Roman law, and it was from this position that they remembered back to the days of King David with longing.

But what they missed was that David's military greatness, and the expanse of Israel's kingdom under his influence, was secondary to David's greatness as a priest/king who brought the people back to the heart of God. In fact it was Israel's connection with God during David's reign that led to their national greatness. And this is why throughout many of the Messianic Psalms we can see, in hind sight, what the residents of the first century missed in their expectation of a Messiah.

So in Psalm 72, David sings about what will happen when the Messianic kingdom comes near. He prays:

Endow the king with your justice, O God...
May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice....
For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.

He will take pity on the weak and the needy
 and save the needy from death....
 Then all nations will be blessed through him,
 and they will call him blessed.
 Praise be to the LORD God...
 may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
 Amen and Amen. (Psalm 72)

Did you catch the theme there? When God's kingdom comes near, the evidence that it has arrived is that the afflicted that lack justice, and the weak, and the needy are taken care of. And it is when this happens that the nations will be blessed and God's name will be glorified in all the earth.

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You see when Jesus showed up many in Israel missed Him because they were expecting a king like David. But what they missed was that David, in many ways – but not all, was a king like God, and that's why he was great. But Jesus was not a king like David, He was God. And so in Jesus, like was only hinted at with David, God's kingdom was coming near, and the evidence was that the things God cares most about were beginning to be done like never before.

This is why in Luke Jesus begins His ministry by reading out of Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
 because he has anointed me
 to proclaim good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
 and recovery of sight for the blind,
 to set the oppressed free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

And when John the Baptist wondered if Jesus was the Messiah Jesus replied:

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of Me." (Matthew 11:4-6)

So there is no doubt that the gospel for Jesus meant extending the rule of God to earth in a way that makes a difference here. For Jesus the gospel is not simply that we get to go to heaven when we die, but primarily that we get to see heaven come to earth as God works through us today. Yes, eternity will be great, but if we will let God's rule extend through us heaven will start right now.

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So how do we get in on this?

Here is where we get to the last thing Jesus says in verse 15 is “Repent and believe the good news.”

Now there are two very weighty words here. But just to touch on them, the word “repent” doesn’t mean “say you are sorry” it means “change what you are doing or where you are going. Turn around, do something different.” So live your life in light of a different reality. If we want to be part of God’s kingdom this is what Jesus asks us to do. And then He tells us what we should repent towards. He says “believe the good news” about God’s kingdom coming near!

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If you were with us during our study of James you know that to believe something in Scripture means more than mental ascent, it means putting your faith to work.

So Jesus says “the time has come. The kingdom of God has come near” so stop living the way you are and allow your conviction about God breaking into the world and extending His rule in your neighbourhood to control your life.” Jesus’ statement about the kingdom is an invitation to be part of the new wave of God’s expanding rule that Jesus started 2000 years ago and still continues today. That’s the good news.

Friends, Jesus is inviting us to participate in His kingdom. And the kingdom where He is king, God’s kingdom, shows up whenever our passions are aligned with His like David’s was. It shows up when He puts His law in our minds and writes it on our hearts so that we care about the things He cares about. And the scriptures are clear that the heart of God cares for the weak of our society: the spiritually and physically poor, the oppressed, those who aren’t able to get justice. And when we as individuals and a church care about these things we are sharing the heart of God and we are part of expanding His kingdom.

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So in conclusion here’s what this means for us. The gospel of the kingdom that Jesus brought isn’t primarily for us, so that we can go to heaven when we die; it is primarily for us to give away. To be part of God’s kingdom means to be bringing His reign to earth. And the crazy part is that God has seen fit to use us to bring this about.

Friends God wants the people of Prince George to feel the blessing of living their lives to His glory, so they need to hear about Him. And He wants to bring justice to Prince George. He wants to extend freedom to people captive to addiction and bad relationships. He wants to bring healing to hearts and bodies. He wants righteousness to reign in this city, and He wants to use Fort George Baptist Church and the people here to accomplish His will on earth the way it is carried out in heaven. There is no better news than this. This is gospel. It’s news worth shouting about, because it is news that means life will not be the same for us or our community. Friends, God is on the move, His kingdom has come near.