

# The Kingdom of Heaven

By Mark Mayberry

6/21/2015

## INTRODUCTION

Some individuals discount Jesus' teaching on the subject of marriage, divorce and remarriage, as discussed in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, by asserting that Matthew is not a part of the New Testament, but should be considered part of the Law of Moses.

In this lesson, we focus upon the expression, "the kingdom of heaven," which occurs exclusively in the Gospel of Matthew. Our focus is two-fold: (1) Does Matthew's Gospel look backwards or forwards? (2) What can we learn about the Kingdom of Heaven?

### *Definition of the Word*

The Greek word *basileia*, derived from *basileuō* [to be king, reign] refers to "kingdom, sovereignty, royal power" [Thomas 932]. In the NASB, it is rendered "kingdom" (159x), "kingdoms" (3x), and "reigns" (1x)."

BDAG say this word, a term relating to royal administration, refers to "(1) the act of ruling; (a) generally, *kingship, royal power, royal rule*; (b) especially of God's rule, *the royal reign of God* (usually rendered 'kingdom of God,' and often understood as royal realm but with dilution of the primary component of reigning activity), a chiefly eschatological concept, beginning to appear in the prophets, elaborated in apocalyptic passages and taught by Jesus. The expressions vary; β. τοῦ θεοῦ [kingdom of God] and τῶν οὐρανῶν [of heaven] have essentially the same meaning, since Israelites used οὐρανός [heaven] as well as other circumlocutions for θεός [God]; (2) territory ruled by a king, *kingdom*."

Variations include "the kingdom of heaven," "the kingdom of God," "the kingdom of their Father," "His Kingdom" (i.e., Christ), "the coming kingdom of our father David," and "the kingdom of the Lord."

### *Occurrences of the Phrase*

The expression "kingdom of heaven" occurs 32x in 31 NT verses (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19 [2x], 20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1). Additionally, it is also found in a variant reading of John 3:5.

Let us consider these verses, categorizing them according to usage, and making relevant application to our faith and practice.

## THE KINGDOM WAS PENDING

During the days depicted in the four gospels, the kingdom of God was pending. John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt. 3:1-2). Jesus began His Galilean ministry in the same manner: leaving Nazareth and settling in Capernaum, He began to preach and say, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt. 4:12-17, esp. vs. 17). As the twelve apostles were sent forth on the limited commission, going to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, they preached the same message (Matt. 10:5-7).

## THE KINGDOM IS SPIRITUAL

The nation of Israel was a physical kingdom, possessing a king (The Lord God), a territory (the land of Canaan), a constitution (the Law of Moses), and a citizenry (the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel) (Exod. 19:5-6).

Blessings or cursing, prosperity or poverty, success or failure would be determined by Israel’s obedience to God, or lack thereof. This principle was applicable to the nation as a whole (Deut. 28), and also to her rulers (Deut. 17:18-20; 1 Sam. 13:13-14; 1 Kings 9:1-9).

Coming to the New Testament, the concept of the kingdom of God/Christ/heaven is distinctly spiritual in nature (Luke 17:20-21; John 6:15; 18:33-37). In fact, the kingdom and the church are one and the same. After Peter made the good confession (*“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*), Jesus said, *“Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...”* (Matt. 16:13-19, esp. vs. 18-19).

While these terms have distinctive shades of meaning (i.e., the church is the “called out” body of believers while the kingdom denotes the rule of God), both refer to the same realm, but from differing standpoints, and thus are essentially synonymous (Col. 1:13-18; 4:10-16; Eph. 5:5, 22-27).

## THE KINGDOM REQUIRES PROPER ATTITUDE

In the Beatitudes, Jesus said, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 5:3). The Greek word translated “poor” refers to one who crouches and cowers, hence, someone “beggarly, disadvantaged, dependent upon divine resources.” We must also manifest a willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ: *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 5:10-12, esp. vs. 10).

Citizenship in the kingdom calls for humility, a defining characteristic of little children (Matt. 18:1-4; 19:13-15). Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven requires a respect for authority, as witnessed in the centurion at Capernaum (Matthew 8:5-13, esp. vs. 10-11). Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven entails trusting, not in riches, but in God who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy (Matt. 19:23-26; cf. 1 Tim. 6:17-19).

## THE KINGDOM REQUIRES PROPER APPLICATION

Jesus spoke in parables for the dual purpose of both hiding and revealing the truth. Faithful disciples will take heed how they hear (Matt. 13:10-17). Our spiritual understanding of Christianity is aided by Jesus' many parables of comparison (Matt. 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1).

Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven involves walking in the Old Paths while making relevant application to the present day: *"Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old"* (Matt. 13:52).

Rising above the flawed and failed example of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:19-20; 23:13, 15), let us manifest a spirit of willing obedience: *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter"* (Matt. 7:21-23).

## THE KINGDOM WAS MARKED BY A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

As we noted last Sunday morning, in a lesson entitled "The Lord and the Law," Jesus lived and died while the Law of Moses was in force (Gal. 4:4-5). Yet, He brought blessings that were not fully realized under the Law (John 1: 14-18, esp. vs. 17).

First, Jesus fulfilled the Law, not only the Messianic prophecies, but also its demands regarding obedience, and was thus qualified to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin. Next, He explained the Law, setting aside misconceptions and offering clarification regarding its demands. Finally, the Lord Jesus Christ also replaced the Law, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, setting forth the standards that would govern the Christian era, bringing in a new and better covenant (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:16-21). This same message would later be preached to the Gentiles (Matt. 24:9-14, esp. vs. 14; Mark 13:9-13, esp. vs. 10). Indeed, the gospel is for all (Mark 16:15-16; Rom. 1:16-17).

Note the distinction in status between John the Baptist, who lived and died under the Law of Moses, and other disciples, who would live to see the establishment of the Messianic kingdom (Matt. 11:7-15; 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27). Luke's account is similar but distinct: *"The Law and*

*the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it” (Luke 16:14-17, esp. vs. 16).*

The words of Jesus, recorded by Matthew, are applicable to the New Testament pattern of church discipline (Matt. 18:15-17).

The words of Jesus, recorded in the synoptic gospels, are applicable to the observance of the Lord’s Supper, clearly a part of worship in the Christian era (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Finally, the words of Jesus, recorded by Matthew, are applicable to the present law that governs marriage, divorce and remarriage (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:3-12, esp. vs. 12).

The Greek word *parektos*, translated “except” in Matthew 5:32, means “in addition, except” [Thomas 3924]. BDAG say it “(1) pertains to being different and in addition to something else, with focus on being external, *besides, outside*; (2) pertaining to something left out of other considerations, *apart from, except for*” (Matt. 5:32; 19:9 [variant reading]; Acts 26:29; cf. Luke 13:1-5).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus employs the formula, “*You have heard that it was said (or alternatively, that the ancients were told)... but I say unto you...*” Quoting a prohibition or principle contained in the Mosaic Code, Jesus proceeded to give His own inspired admonitions on the subject. In this manner, Jesus Christ was not simply explaining the Law of Moses, but expressing distinctive teaching on the subjects of murder (Matt. 5:21; Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:17), adultery (Matt. 5:27; Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), lying (Matt. 5:33; Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21-23), vengeance (Matt. 5:38; Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deu. 19:21), and also love vs. hatred (Matt. 5:43; Lev. 19:18; Deut. 23:3-4).

Addressing questions about marriage raised by the Corinthians, Paul refers to the earthly teaching of Christ as authoritative, stressing the general rule that marriage is for life, without pausing to consider the exception clause allowing for divorce and subsequent remarriage in cases of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 7:10-16).

## CONCLUSION

Some individuals over-emphasize the words of Jesus, mistakenly believing that they are more sacred than that of Peter or Paul. However, faithful disciples recognize that the apostles and prophets were guided by the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, their message is inspired, and thus authoritative.

Other individuals under-emphasize the words of Jesus, mistakenly believing that He only offered instructing and clarification regarding the Law of Moses. Since the law of Moses has

been taken out of the way and nailed to the cross, they say the teaching of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels, are not relevant to the present Christian dispensation. However, faithful disciples understand that Jesus came preaching and teaching the gospel.

*"I say unto you"* occurs 53x in the Gospel of Matthew, 18x in Mark, 30x in Luke, and 27x in John's Gospel. Jesus Christ is the speaker in almost all of these passages. Who is bold enough or sufficiently foolish enough to say, "The words of Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, (or perhaps, the other gospels also), are not pertinent to our lives!"

It is folly to say that the gospels are not applicable to Christians. Atheists and unbelievers reject teachings of Jesus Christ. Misguided disciples who make such assertions put themselves in the same camp. Both renounce His message as irrelevant and effectively remove Him from His throne. Who can believe it?