**Foundations (55 of 60) The Kingdom of God - RC Sproul**

Jesus taught us to pray, ìYour Kingdom come.î But what exactly is this Kingdom He was talking about? Thatís our topic today on Renewing Your Mind. Welcome to Renewing Your Mind with the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R. C. Sproul. The Kingdom of God is a prevalent theme in Scripture.

Jesus preached on the Kingdom throughout His earthly ministry, and Paul often wrote about it in his letters. But many Christians still donít understand what the Kingdom is or their role in it. Today Dr. Sproul explains the nature of the Kingdom of God and the churchís fundamental task in bringing it about.

This half-hour lesson is part of the comprehensive series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology. Hereís Dr. R. C. Sproul. I remember when I was a boy that I would hear a strange expression from time to time.

Somebody would look at a big, massive structure or building and say, ìThat building will last until Kingdom come.î Or, ìThis war is going to last until Kingdom come.î And I wasnít sure as a child what that expression meant. I didnít know what ìKingdom comeî was referring to. And then, of course, I learned the Lordís Prayer.

And the Lordís Prayer begins, ìOur Father who art in heaven.î And the very first petition of the Lordís Prayer is that the name of God would be revered and sanctified, ìHallowed be thy name.î And then moves immediately to what? ìThy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.î Now, that indicates that the Kingdom of God is already clearly manifest and present in heaven. The will of God is done every moment in heaven.

The angels that surround the throne of God and the departed saints that are in His presence are not engaged in disobedience and in sin. Whatever God declares, whatever He wills, is accomplished by those who are in His presence. But in this world, right now, itís not the same.

And Iíve said in the past, I think thereís a correlation among these injunctives that Jesus gives, and that He starts with the statement, ìHallowed be thy name.î Because I donít think that the Kingdom of God is going to come on earth and that the will of God will be done unless or until people begin to regard the name of God as holy. But in any case, this is to be a priority of the prayer of the people of God, that we pray for the coming of the Kingdom. Well, that immediately raises this question.

Is the Kingdom for which we are praying something that will not be manifest until the distant future? Or, is there any sense in which that Kingdom has already begun to become manifest? And that is a fierce matter of debate in the religious community. First of all, when we look at this concept of the Kingdom of God, we find that it is a concept that is of central importance to Scripture. John Bright, the great Old Testament scholar and archaeologist and associate of William Foxwell Albright, in his book, The Kingdom of God, said that the one unifying theme that ties together the whole Bible from the Old Testament to the New Testament is the theme of the Kingdom of God.

Because very early in the Old Testament, in the prophetic message, the promise was made of a future realm where the sovereignty of God would be so manifest and so obeyed that His Kingdom would be universal and eternal. Now this did not deny in the early stages of the Old Testament that God reigns sovereignly over the whole universe right now. In one sense, the Lord God omnipotent reigns from the moment He creates.

He is certainly the Lord over everything. But that's not the idea that's in view here of the Kingdom of God, where we're talking about the voluntary submission of the creature to the Lordship of God, because the Kingdom of this world, of which God is Lord over from the very moment of creation, is one that is fundamentally in rebellion against its King. And so, the promise of the Kingdom in the Old Testament was a promise that would be universal and would be eternal.

When I say universal, not that everybody would be believers or that everybody would be redeemed, but that everybody would obey. Some would obey willingly, and they would bow the knee out of a genuine, sincere sense of allegiance and devotion, and those that were hostile would have their knees broken with a rod of iron, and they would kneel anyway, not because they wanted to, but because they were forced into submission. And so, the promise became transmitted through Scripture that the day would come when people of all nations would submit to God's anointed King.

And this was all bound up with the promise of the coming Messiah. The Messiah would be the one who would bring God's Kingdom to earth. He would be the Lord's anointed King.

And here, we're talking about not the Kingdom of the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, but the Kingdom of Christ, that is, the Kingdom of the earthly Messiah, who is the incarnation of the divine Logos. Now, it's significant that in the New Testament, sometimes the writers speak of the Kingdom of God, and other times the references to the Kingdom of Heaven. And chiefly, the phrase, Kingdom of Heaven, is found in Matthew's Gospel, whereas the other Gospel writers, particularly Luke, refers to the Kingdom as the Kingdom of God.

And some have argued that they're talking about two different things, one being this reign of God, and the other one the heavenly reign. But if there's a consensus here among New Testament scholars, it would be this, that the only difference is a difference in language, because Matthew was writing as a Jew to a Jewish audience, where they were so protective of the sacred name of God that they would use what was called paraphrasis. Paraphrasis was an attempt to use a substitute term for another term, rather than, say, the other term straight out.

Paraphrasis, P-E-R-I, P-H-R-A-S, and so on, is a synonym for circumlocution. We know what that means. Circum means to go around.

Well, so does peri. It's the same prefix. A periscope is one that goes around.

And so, paraphrasis is you circle around a concept, but you don't ever exactly land on. And so, in the Old Testament, the Jews, instead of speaking boldly of Yahweh, their God, they would use the title Lord or Adonai as a substitute or paraphrastic reference to God. Now, the same thing happens with this kingdom concept.

The kingdom of heaven is simply a Jewish paraphrase, if you will, or paraphrasis. I shouldn't say paraphrase, because that's P-A-R-A. It's P-E-R-I I'm talking about, a Jewish substitute for the word God.

But they mean the same thing. But the real controversy has to do with the timing of the kingdom of God and its nature. There are those who believe that the kingdom of God of which the Bible speaks is something that is completely future.

In fact, I would say that is the majority report among professing evangelical Christians at the end of the twentieth century. I personally believe that there is no biblical foundation for that, and that that concept robs the church of very important teachings with respect to the kingdom of God that are clearly set forth in the New Testament. And in fact, this is one of those occasions where I have to step back in some astonishment that anybody would come to the conclusion that the biblical concept of the kingdom of God sets it totally and exclusively in the future in light of the manifold evidence of the biblical data.

For example, when the New Testament opens, it opens with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist and in Mark's gospel the appearance of John the Baptist with his simple message what? Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. And there is a time frame that is put with respect to John, and the whole significance of the appearance of John the Baptist according to the Old Testament is that Jesus Himself interpreted that the Old Testament prophet talked about the herald of the coming King who would come to prepare the highway for the coming of the Lord and call the people to repentance. And the Old Testament prophets would talk about the kingdom of God that was going to come someday in the ambiguous future.

But when John comes, he says, wait a minute, it's time to repent now, folks. Why? Because the kingdom of God is at hand. And the time frame reference of that phrase in the language at hand means it's knocking at the door.

It is about to burst on the scene. And if we further examine the message of John the Baptist, we see how urgent is his warning of the crisis situation of the moment when he says, the axe is laid at the root of the tree. Not like the woodsman back in the shop sharpening his axe and thinking about the trees he's going to chop down this afternoon, or even that he's come out to the field and started chipping away at the outer bark.

But he's penetrated to the very heart of the tree where one more blow from the axe is going to bring the tree crashing down. The axe is laid at the root of the tree. His fan, the winnowing fan, is in his hand, and he's saying, we're running out of time, and you're not ready.

And he called the people to submit to this purification rite of baptism so that they may be prepared for the coming of the Messiah and of His kingdom. Then Christ comes on the scene just a short time later, and He adopts the same message and says to the people, repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. And then there are the distinctions that are made in the New Testament between the behavior of John the Baptist and the behavior of Jesus.

John the Baptist appears in an ascetic type of manifestation where he lives a life of radical self-denial. He lives on locusts and wild honey, and he's dressed up like the Old Testament prophets coming out of the desert and so on. Jesus is accused of being a glutton and a wine-bibber.

He's going to parties. He goes to the wedding feast at Canaan. He's eating at the banquet feast with the tax collectors, and some of his critics are saying, hey, he's not like John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was into self-denial. Jesus is having a good time. Why aren't His disciples fasting all the time like John's were? And what does Jesus say? You fast when the bridegroom is absent.

But when the bridegroom comes, it's time for celebration. And then He goes from there and says to the people that the kingdom of God is a hesitation. One translation reads Jesus saying, the kingdom of God is within you.

Familiar with that? You've heard that? I'm sure. I personally think that's a poor translation, because that suggests the idea that the kingdom of God is something that happens in the hearts of people, and it doesn't have any real, objective, tangible existence. The word that is used there in that text is more regularly translated, instead of within, it's translated by the English word among.

So, what I think Jesus was saying is the kingdom of God is among you. That is, the kingdom of God is now, as I speak, in your midst. Why would He say that? Well, because the King was there.

The King was in the midst of the people. And then He later says, if you see me casting out Satan by the finger of God, then you know what? The kingdom of God has come upon you. And so, first you have John with his message of warning of the radical nearness of the breakthrough of the kingdom.

Jesus coming now, announcing the presence of the kingdom, and then of course, as we've already seen in our study of Christology, the acme of Jesus' redemptive work so far is found in His ascension, where He leaves this world to go to His coronation, where at that point God declares Him King. Now, back up again to the last question that the disciples asked of Jesus before He departed this world. I've often said to my seminary students, if you were in a room with Jesus, you had a chance to ask Him one question, what would it be? An interesting question to think about.

Well, it came to that point that Jesus' disciples had been asking Him tons of questions during His earthly ministry, but He had a chance for one last one. What was it? As He stood there ready to depart on the Mount of Ascension, the Mount of Olives, they said to Jesus, Lord, will You now restore the kingdom to Israel? I mean, they had lived in breathless anticipation for Jesus to make His move. He's the King, the kingdom is among us.

They said, now Jesus, give us that universal, eternal kingdom that we've waited for the Messiah to bring, drive out the Romans, and let's establish it. Are you going to do it right now? Here we are. We're waiting.

We're assembled. We've been faithful now throughout your entire ministry. What does Jesus say? How many times do I have to tell you, I'm never going to establish a kingdom like that? No, that's not what He said.

He said it in so many words, it's none of your business. It's not for you to know the times and the seasons which the Father has appointed. But you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the uttermost parts of the earth, and you shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you.

He gives the fundamental mission of the church to these people at that moment in direct response to their question about the kingdom. Calvin understood Jesus to be saying this, that Jesus is saying to those people, I'm leaving, I'm going to my coronation, I will be king, but my kingship over this realm will not be visible yet to everybody in this world. Men's eyes will be blind to my kingship, but I'm giving you the task of making visible my invisible kingdom.

You are to give testimony to bear witness to my kingship. And so the fundamental task of the church is to bear witness to the kingdom of God to the extent that it already exists, that the Lord Christ has been crowned, our King reigns now. And for us to put the kingdom of God entirely in the future is to miss one of the most significant points of the New Testament, and to act as if we're still living back in the Old Testament days hoping that someday our Prince will come.

Our Prince has already come. He has initiated the kingdom of God, but what is future is its final consummation. Do you see the difference between saying it started, but it hasn't been completed, and saying it hasn't even started yet, that it all comes in the future? Now if we look again at Jesus' teaching in the New Testament, we know that one of His favorite means of communication pedagogically was by the use of the parable.

And if you would just study the parables of Jesus in the New Testament, you will see that the number one theme, not the only theme, but the number one theme that Jesus teaches concerning in the parables is the kingdom of God. How many of the parables begin with these words, the kingdom of God is like unto this, or it's like unto that. And one of the concepts that comes out in the teaching of Jesus' parables is the progressive character of the kingdom, that the kingdom is something according to Jesus that starts very small, but then over time it begins to expand, to enlarge, to grow until it encompasses all things.

What are some of the illustrations He uses or analogies? The kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, the smallest seed. You plant it, and from that tiny seed grows this enormous tree. The kingdom of God is like the woman with her leaven, who puts a little leaven, and the lump grows and expands and enlarges to fill up all of this space.

In the Old Testament, the prediction was that the Messianic kingdom would be a stone cut without hands, which would become a great mountain. And so, Jesus talks about this progressive growth, and that we as His disciples in this world are to seek after these things. Again, the priority of the Christian life according to Jesus is what? Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.

Something that we could overlook if we move too quickly here is that when Jesus says, seek first, the word that He uses there is the Greek word protos, and it doesn't simply mean first in a series or the first step in a chronology, but it has the weight and the force of first in terms of priority, first in the order of importance. You want to get your priorities straight as a Christian? You want to know what Jesus is saying to His people? The first thing, the most important thing I want you to seek is the kingdom of God. I mean, it's just astonishing to me how little time we give to this concept when it's on Jesus' lips constantly during His earthly ministry.

Kingdom of God is like this. Seek it. Find it.

It's like the pearl of great price. And so that even now as those who are Christ's people who have discovered the reality of His kingdom, who have given their allegiance to Christ as their King, who reigns right now as the Lamb who is worthy to receive the kingdom of God, so that kingdom has begun and is growing and building, but will not be consummated until Christ comes at the end of human history to put all of His enemies at His feet, to subdue all kingdoms, and then the kingdom which is right now invisible will become visible. But again, Calvin's point when he said that it is the task of the visible church to make the invisible kingdom visible does not mean that because the kingdom is invisible that it's therefore unreal.

It is very real. And then the final consummation which we'll look at later on involves the coming of the new Jerusalem, the new heaven, the new earth, the complete renovation of the created order as we know it, where Christ will establish His kingdom in its full glory and manifestation. And that kingdom will go on forever.

The kingdom of God is here. And the task of the church is to make the invisible kingdom visible. You're listening to Renewing Your Mind and a lesson from Dr. R. C. Sproul titled, The Kingdom of God.

Well, we hope today's lesson brought some clarity and helped you understand the kingdom of God. Many Christians are familiar with the phrase, but they aren't quite sure what the kingdom refers to. It seems too abstract.

You can share today's lesson or listen through the series on systematic theology on your own. You can request this lesson on DVD right now. It's part of the comprehensive 60-message series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology.

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