

The Kingdom in Matthew

The gospel of the kingdom, the life of the kingdom, the exercise of the kingdom, and the incentive of the kingdom are four great matters in Matthew.

The Gospel of the Kingdom

For many people the gospel is uniquely a matter of grace. However, when the good news of God's grace is first mentioned in the New Testament, it is called the gospel of the kingdom: "Jesus went about in all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23). The kingdom is the particular emphasis of the Gospel of Matthew; hence, the subject of this book is the gospel of the kingdom (24:14). Although the other three Gospels also speak of the kingdom (Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; John 3:3, 5), the emphasis of their gospel messages is God's compassion and grace. Thus, in Mark the gospel is focused on the Son of Man coming not to be served but to serve sinners with His gospel service (10:45); in Luke the gospel is for the forgiveness of sins (1:77; 24:47); and in John the gospel is of life, that man would have life and have it abundantly (1:4; 10:10; 20:31). These aspects emphasize grace, whereas Matthew emphasizes the kingdom. The kingdom of God is the reign of God, the kingdom of the heavens is the reign of the heavens, and the gospel of the kingdom is preached in order to establish God's reign in man.

In order to appreciate the distinction between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of grace, it is helpful to consider the two systems of God in the universe according to the revelation in the Scriptures: government and grace (Nee 746-766). God deals with man according to grace, and He also deals with man according to His government. These two systems are separate yet complementary. For example, when Adam and Eve transgressed God's command by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God gave them the promise that the seed of the woman would come to bruise the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). This was the promise of Christ's redemption given freely according to God's grace. Nevertheless, because of His government, God cast them out of the garden of Eden and set a guard of cherubim at its entrance (v. 24). In Numbers, when the children of Israel refused to enter the land of Canaan at Kadesh-barnea, God judged them and did not permit that generation to enter

(chs. 13—14). This was according to His government. But according to His grace, the children of Israel continued to enjoy His presence in the fire and the cloud and His supply of the water from the rock and the manna. When King David fell in the matter of Bath-sheba, he repented and was forgiven by God, and thereby enjoyed a particular fellowship with Him (Psa. 51). This was God's grace to David. But according to His government, God still required David to bear the judgment, and the sword did not depart from David's house for the rest of his life (2 Sam. 12:7-14). Grace and government also existed side by side in the kingdom of Israel. The priests and the prophets supplied the people with the offerings and the divine speaking according to God's grace, while the kings and leaders brought the people the rule and discipline of God's government. Moreover, in the New Testament, grace and government continue among the Lord's people. The lives of John the Baptist, Ananias and Sapphira, Barnabas, and the Corinthian believers all illustrate that God deals with His people both by grace and by government (Matt. 4:12; 11:2-6; Acts 5:1-11; 15:37-39; 1 Cor. 11:30-34).

God's kingdom is a matter of His government, whereas God's forgiveness and life-imparting are matters of His grace. If we conceive of the gospel only in terms of grace, we will neglect a major part of the gospel message. God deals with the situation of fallen man not only through His grace but also through His government. In fact, the ultimate object of the gospel is not to save man from his sin but to restore God's sovereign authority, His rule, in the universe (Rev. 11:15). The purpose of the gospel is not merely to make us recipients of God's grace but even more to bring us into God's kingdom and under His sovereign rule.¹

Many readers of the Gospels acknowledge that the Lord Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom, but they consider the kingdom to be a matter of the future—for example, the millennial kingdom of the next age, when Christ will rule the earth from His throne in Jerusalem or the eternal kingdom of the new heaven and new earth. Since grace has replaced the law in God's New Testament dispensation and the kingdom is in the future, they associate God's dealing with His chosen people today as only a matter of grace, not a matter of government. However,

the gospel that the Lord Jesus proclaimed and the early disciples received was first and foremost the gospel of the kingdom that brings man under God's reign. Although it is true that the manifestation of the kingdom must wait until the coming age and eternity, nevertheless, the kingdom in its reality has been present from the beginning of the New Testament onward. Hence, after the Lord's ascension to the heavens in Acts, the apostles went out to preach the kingdom of God, and in the Epistles they wrote concerning the believers both participating in the kingdom in the present age as well as entering into the kingdom at the Lord's return (Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; Rom. 14:17; 2 Pet. 1:11).

In the New Testament grace does not replace the kingdom. The system of grace is for the system of government. God's grace is for His kingdom, because only through His grace can the demands of His kingdom be met. When the gospel of the kingdom is announced to man, he is enlightened and repents and is then prepared to receive God's grace. On the one hand, because of their transgressions, humans need a Savior to save them from God's condemnation. Through God's grace, the Lord Jesus came to redeem us from our sins and to save us from the wrath of God. On the other hand, humans have a more fundamental problem; that is, they are in rebellion against God. Indeed, the reason we sin is that we are lawless; we are not subject to the reign of God. The problem of rebellion existed long before the creation of man. Later, when Adam sinned, he sided with the devil, who was the first to rebel against God (Isa. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:12-19); therefore, Adam's sin was a rebellion against God's authority. As a result, humankind was no longer subject to God's reign. Hence, the deeper purpose of the Lord Jesus' coming in the Gospels was to establish God's authority and heavenly kingdom on the earth. He established this not through physical force but through His work on the cross, in which He cast out the ruler of this world, stripped off the rebellious rulers and the authorities, and destroyed the devil and his works (John 12:31; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:8).

Because the gospel of the kingdom brings in the authority of God, the matter of authority characterizes the ministries of both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus in Matthew. The first word of the gospel uttered by John and the Lord Himself was, "Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near" (3:2; 4:17). *Repent* does not fundamentally mean to show remorse or sorrow for sin but to have a change of mind, a turn in purpose (although the issue of repentance is regret). John and the Lord Jesus proclaimed the gospel of repentance because humans resist God's authority, reject His rule, and refuse to allow Him to reign over them. Therefore, there is a need for repentance, that is, a change in mind and purpose, in order to become subject once more to the authority of heaven.

Furthermore, John the Baptist's message called men to be subject to the rule of the kingdom:

Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight His paths... Offspring of vipers, who prompted you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce then fruit worthy of your repentance...Every tree therefore that does not produce good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire...He Himself will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. (3:3, 7-8, 10-11, referring to God's judgment of the lake of fire on unrighteousness)

John came in the way of righteousness (21:32), and the Lord Jesus was baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness (3:15). In this, the Lord fully submitted to the God-ordained requirement of His forerunner's ministry.

The Lord Jesus' speaking in Matthew 5—7 developed His forerunner's speaking concerning the righteousness of the kingdom. The Lord emphasized that the people of the kingdom of the heavens seek righteousness, a surpassing righteousness (5:6; 10, 20, 48; 6:1, 33). In this message He contrasted righteousness with lawlessness. Workers of lawlessness are those who do many good things for God in the Lord's name. The Lord condemned them not because their works are morally wrong but because they do not do the will of the Father (7:21-23). This is rebellion. The kingdom is where the Father's will is obeyed absolutely. Moreover, when the Lord instructed His disciples in the matter of prayer, it was to pray for the kingdom to come on the earth, that the Father's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven (6:10).

Not only in His speaking but also in His move for His ministry, the Lord set forth the kingdom's authority. He asserted this authority over the forces of nature by calming the winds and the sea that opposed Him (8:23-27). He demonstrated His authority over the demons that railed against Him by casting them out (vv. 28-34). He alone had the authority to forgive sins, and He proved this by healing the paralytic man (9:1-8). In 10:16—11:1 He prepared His disciples for the opposition and enmity that they would face from the warfare between the kingdom of the heavens and the kingdom of darkness. When this opposition reached its climax in 12:22-37, the Lord revealed that the gospel requires first the binding of the devil and his kingdom with authority in order that those held by him can be released to enter into the kingdom of the heavens. In both speaking and action, therefore, John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus demonstrated that the gospel of the kingdom brings God's authority to man.

The Life of the Kingdom

We have seen that the kingdom concerns the matter of authority. Because of its misuse in human government and

in church history, many consider authority to be an unpleasant matter. However, in the Bible genuine authority goes together with the divine life, which is a most pleasant matter. Thus, in the beginning of the divine revelation, there is the matter of authority in Genesis 1:26, when God gave man dominion over all the created things, and the matter of life in 2:8-9, when He placed man before the tree of life. Man was created in God's image so that he might exercise God's dominion, but he was not to do so by virtue of his own life. Rather, God provided the tree of life, signifying God's life, for man to partake of and live by in order to fulfill the requirements of God's image and dominion. Adam fell because he had failed to take in the life of the tree of life (3:22). By his fall he not only lost the enjoyment of God's life; he also forfeited the exercise of God's dominion. At the end of the Bible, authority and life are seen in the New Jerusalem. There, the apostle John saw "a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street. And on this side and on that side of the river was the tree of life" (Rev. 22:1-2). The throne is for authority, but a river and a tree issue from the throne, both of which are for life.

Authority and life are also associated in the Gospels. In John 3:3 and 5 the Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that unless a person is born anew, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. To enter into the kingdom of God requires a second birth. To be born anew is to be born of God, to be born of the divine life (1:12-13). In our first birth, we received our natural human life from our parents, but if we believe into Christ, we are born a second time and receive the divine life in addition to our human life. Therefore, John presents both the authority of God and the life of God. In addition, because of our fall, we need the blood of Christ, which qualifies us to receive God as life. These three—God's authority, the blood of Jesus His Son, and the life of God—correspond to the messages of the three Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John.

The divine life that we receive through regeneration is critical for our living in the kingdom of God. The kingdom raises the righteous requirements on man far above those of the Old Testament law. The law of the Old Testament made demands upon man that man could not fulfill due to his fallen sinful nature: "That which the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh" (Rom. 8:3), shutting up all under sin until Christ came (Gal. 3:22). It was the impossibility of obtaining righteousness through the law that kept man for Christ, and thus the law conducted us to Christ (v. 24). When Christ came, the law was set aside. Nevertheless, mysteriously, when the Lord Jesus Christ came in the flesh to fallen, defeated man, He raised God's demand on man to a much higher level. The following words, perhaps the most widely known of all that the Lord Jesus spoke, present us with such a high requirement:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I tell you not to resist him who is evil; rather whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And to him who wishes to sue you and take your tunic, yield to him your cloak also; and whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. To him who asks of you, give; and from him who wants to borrow from you, do not turn away. You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt. 5:38-44)

The kingdom's higher requirement on man indicates that the gospel of the kingdom is to bring man under a much higher authority. In the dispensation of law, man was under the rule of God's commandment. But in the kingdom of the heavens, man is to be ruled by the heavens, that is, to be under the direct rule of God Himself.

The Old Testament law, through its impossibility, called for a righteousness that is apart from the law, a righteousness through faith in Christ and His redeeming death (Rom. 3:21-22; Phil. 3:9). However, those who have been justified by faith must now live a life in the kingdom that is of the highest standard of righteousness. This is an even greater impossibility. In Matthew 19 a rich young man sought to enter the kingdom through keeping the commandments. He had confidence in the strength of his natural life and sought perfection by it. Yet the Lord Jesus touched him at his point of weakness, which was his love of possessions. Then the weakness and fragility of his natural life were exposed. As the young man left, the Lord commented that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. The disciples were astonished and said, "Who then can be saved?" and the Lord responded, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (vv. 16-26).

Whereas the law presented us with a fearful impossibility, the gospel of the kingdom presents us with a wonderful possibility. The purpose of the law's demands was to show that we cannot be justified apart from Christ. The purpose of the kingdom's demands is to show that we must no longer live by our own life but by another life, the life that we received through justification, that is, the divine life. The righteousness of the kingdom, the perfection demanded of the sons of the heavenly Father, cannot be lived by the strength of our human life. It requires the power of the divine life. The demands of the kingdom are the opportunity for the kingdom people to live not by their own life but by another life, the divine life that effortlessly fulfills the surpassing demands.

To use a very vivid illustration, it is simply impossible for a dog to fly. At most he may jump in the air for a couple

of seconds. But a bird flies effortlessly. In fact, to restrain a bird from flying requires a cage. Our natural life is like the life of the dog; the requirement of the kingdom is like the requirement to fly; and the divine life, through which the kingdom's requirements are effortlessly fulfilled, is like the life of the bird.

We may then wonder why we frequently fail to fulfill the standard of the righteousness in the kingdom. It is because we continue to live by our natural life rather than by the divine life, by the indwelling Christ in our spirit. Often, when we hear a requirement of the kingdom, we are stirred up and immediately try to meet the requirement by our natural life. The result is that we fail. But why do we do this repeatedly? Fundamentally, the issue is one of authority, of the kingdom. We seek to fulfill the kingdom requirements independently of the rule of God. Just as the children of Israel, having a zeal for God, sought to establish their own righteousness and were not subject to the righteousness of God (Rom. 10:3), many believers seek to live the Christian life without being subject to God's authority in His kingdom. As soon as we move out of the realm of God's authority, we are no longer able to participate in the divine life experientially. The river of water of life proceeds out of the throne. Being subject to the authority of the kingdom is the means to participate in the divine life of the kingdom. Prayer, fasting, good works, prophesying, or any kind of endeavor in the spiritual realm cannot alter this basic principle. If we discover that we are lacking in the experience of God's life in its fullness, we need only to examine ourselves in the matter of authority. The gospel of the kingdom brings us back to the rule of God, and it is this that affords us the supply of the divine life. Hence, it is truly the good news.

The Exercise of the Kingdom

In order to know the exercise of the kingdom we must know the kingdom's relationship to the church. Matthew is the Gospel that proclaims the kingdom, but it is also the Gospel that records the two occasions in the Lord Jesus' earthly ministry when He spoke concerning the church. The Lord Jesus began His ministry proclaiming that the kingdom of the heavens had drawn near. Then after Peter received a revelation that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord revealed the church: "Upon this rock I will build My church" (16:16-18). This shows that the kingdom and the church are intimately related. Then the Lord continued, saying, "And the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens" (vv. 18-19). The gates of Hades refer to Satan's authority or power of darkness (Col. 1:13; Acts 26:18); the keys of the kingdom of the heavens refer to the authority of the kingdom. The authority of the kingdom is to be used to defeat the kingdom of Satan; hence, "whatever you bind on the earth shall have been

bound in the heavens, and whatever you loose on the earth shall have been loosed in the heavens" (Matt. 16:19). The binding and loosing is not done by individuals but by the built-up church. By the built-up church Satan's kingdom of darkness is bound, and the will of God is loosed on the earth.

For God's authority to be fully realized on the earth, for His kingdom to come, there must be the church built up by Christ that can exercise His authority to bind the kingdom of Satan. However, in order for there to be a church built up by Christ, there needs to be the presence of the kingdom ("the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near"—3:2). In other words, where the authority of the kingdom is present among a group of people, there the church can be built up. Then the kingdom's authority will be exercised to deal with God's enemy and release His will for His administration on the earth.

The exercise of the kingdom, therefore, requires that we first be built up as the church. The presence of the kingdom is to bring us under the authority of the heavens so that Christ may gain His built-up church. This corresponds to Christ's headship in the church. God gave Christ to be Head over all things to the church, and we must grow up into Him, who is the Head, in all things. To hold the Head and grow up into Him requires submission to His authority. Then out from the Head all the Body, the church, grows and is built up (Eph. 1:22; 4:15-16; Col. 2:19).

In the built-up church the authority of the kingdom is prevailing. This is illustrated in the Lord's second reference to the church in Matthew. In chapter 18 there is a case of a brother who has sinned against another brother and who subsequently refuses to listen to the church. Whatever the church does becomes the decision of the heavens: whatever it binds (condemns) shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever it looses (forgives) shall have been loosed in heaven (v. 18). This is the exercise of the kingdom's authority. But the next verse opens a window on what kind of condition must exist for such authority to be manifested: the prayer that executes this decision must be by two or more members of the church who are in harmony: "If two of you are in harmony on earth concerning any matter for which they ask, it will be done for them from My Father who is in the heavens" (v. 19). For two members to be in harmony and for the Father to do any matter for which they ask doubtless indicate that they are absolutely submissive to the authority of the heavens, are one with the decision of the church, and are praying according to the Father's will. The presence of two or more such members in a local church indicates that there is a measure of building sufficient for the authority of the kingdom to be exercised there.

In order to execute His authority over Satan, God needs

a group of people who would come under His authority absolutely. This group, as representatives of the entire creation, enables God to boast to His enemy that He has a kingdom on the earth where His will, the will of the heavens, is prevailing. This group corporately cooperates with God to deal with Satan and the powers of darkness so that God's authority can be fully established on the earth. God obtained such a kingdom first in Christ individually (12:28; Luke 17:21); He expands this kingdom corporately in the church, which is indwelt by Christ (Col. 1:27; Eph. 3:17), and eventually He gains the whole earth for His kingdom (Rev. 11:15; Dan. 2:44).

The exercise of the kingdom is fully related to the building up of the church. Therefore, whether we can apply the authority of the kingdom depends on whether we are in the building. The degree to which we are being built up with other members in the church as the Body of Christ will be the degree to which we can participate in the exercise of the kingdom.

The Incentive of the Kingdom

The kingdom is a great incentive to the believers to pay the price to do the Father's will. The incentive of the kingdom is presented by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24:32—25:30. Here we see that when He returns at the consummation of the age, He will reward some of His believers, who are His slaves, and He will punish others, depending on whether they have been faithful and diligent or unfaithful and slothful. The reward and punishment of the kingdom will determine the believers' situation in the coming age of the millennium, the kingdom of a thousand years, in which some will participate in the wedding feast, reign together with the Lord, and enter into the joy of the Lord, and others will be in outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Rev. 20:4; Matt. 24:47, 51; 25:10, 12, 21, 23, 30). These matters do not refer to the believers' eternal destiny, which is secure by the Lord's redemption alone (John 10:28-29). Rather, they refer to the dispensational reward and punishment of the next age, which is a great incentive for us to live in the kingdom today.

Living the kingdom life for the fulfillment of the Father's will requires paying a price. Matthew 24:32-44 charges the believers to watch and be ready in waiting for the Lord's return. This refers to our living. Verses 45 through 51 charge the believers to be faithful and prudent before the Lord returns; this refers to our service. Following this, in chapter 25 the Lord Jesus gave two parables concerning watchfulness and faithfulness: the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents. In the parable of the virgins the prudent virgins have sufficient oil not only in their lamps but also in their vessels when the bridegroom comes. They signify those believers

who are exercised to be filled with the Holy Spirit while waiting for the Lord to come (vv. 1-10). In the parable of the talents the faithful slaves traded the talents their master gave them and gained more talents to give him at his return. They signify those believers who use the Lord's gift to gain an increase for His interest before He comes (vv. 14-23). Both the prudent virgins and the faithful slaves paid the price during their lives while the Lord was away—the former to buy the oil and the latter to trade diligently and faithfully—and they were rewarded by the Lord at His coming. In contrast, the foolish virgins had no oil in their vessels, and the slothful slave gained nothing for his master, because they were unwilling to pay the price; hence, they were punished by the Lord (vv. 11-13, 24-30). These parables reveal that our reward or punishment as believers at the Lord Jesus' return is determined by our willingness to pay the price today for the kingdom.

The reward and punishment of the kingdom presented in Matthew seemingly contradicts the grace of God. Certainly, grace denotes God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, which is freely given to humankind and not based on any works of righteousness that we have done (Titus 3:4-5). Justification is by faith alone and results in our receiving the gift of eternal life (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 5:18). However, as we have seen, this is only one side of the gospel. The other side concerns the kingdom for the establishing and expansion of God's sovereign rule and the fulfillment of His will. This requires that we live the kingdom life for the carrying out of the Father's will after we are justified and receive God's eternal life. The kingdom is a matter of government. According to His government, God will reward some and punish others in His kingdom according to how they dealt with the requirements of the kingdom. The kingdom's requirements neither contradict His grace, which assures the believers of their eternal salvation, nor set His grace aside. Rather, it is only through His grace, the riches of His divine life freely given to us, that the kingdom's requirements can be fulfilled. For this, the incentive of the kingdom becomes a great motivation for us to come under the kingdom's authority to receive the grace, the rich supply of the divine life, which will enable us to live a life of the highest standard of righteousness in the kingdom.

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Notes

¹The kingdom's relation to the gospel, and also its relation to life and the church, is fully developed in *The Kingdom and the Church* by Witness Lee (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1980).

Works Cited

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