

To All People Groups
The Kingdom Gospel in Matthew
Matthew 24:14

The Gospel of the Kingdom

The kingdom of God is the primary drumbeat of the gospel message. John the Baptist preached the kingdom. Jesus preached the kingdom. Jesus raised up disciples to preach the kingdom. Among all of the good messages that the Bible records from Jesus' teachings, the kingdom of God is the centerpiece.

The Last Days

In Matthew 24, Jesus is preparing for his own arduous journey to death and resurrection. As the countdown beckons, Jesus teaches with a dire sense about ultimate things and end times. He predicts the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem. He prepares the disciples for false Christs and false prophets. He points to wars, rumors of wars, famine, and earthquakes as harbingers of the last days. People will turn away from faith. Betrayal and hate will characterize a day when love will grow cold and wickedness will increase.

Through it all, the gospel of the kingdom "will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Jesus phrases it as a pending reality, not as an imperative. "This will happen;" not, "You must make sure that this happens." But when you couple it with Matthew 28:19-20 (The Great Commission), and when you view the verse in the context of Jesus' whole counsel, it becomes our imperative. We are the ones, with generations before (and after?) who preach this kingdom gospel. No generation seems more likely to see this final drama unfold than ours. In an age of globalization and multi-faceted communication, it is conceivable that all nations (*ethne* or people groups) will be "preached to" in our lifetimes. And then the end, Jesus says, will come.

What Else?

Great distress will follow, as false Christs lead people astray, and the current physical realm begins to unravel.

Then Jesus will appear as a champion to gather his followers and bring in the next era of cosmic reality. No one knows the day. Everyone will be surprised. So be ready. Be a faithful and wise servant. Let the Master find you doing the things he asked you to do. Bad things are in store for those who aren't ready. Their future is a horrific place prepared for hypocrites.

In Jesus' teachings, it is not unusual for Jesus to sound harsher on "hypocrites" than on the godless masses. He's consistently sympathetic and compassionate toward

everyday people who are lost. His hardest words and most daunting warnings are reserved for those who have enough information to know God and enough religion to claim high ground – but don't really follow God's leading. For those who don't know, Jesus would simply say, "Tell them, show them, and love them." For those who should know but are blind and arrogant and hypocritical, Jesus says, "Wake up or else."

In the immediate context, Jesus is confronting the religious establishment – even goading them into their foregone role in the arrest and death of the Lamb. In the ongoing sense, Jesus proves again and again his distaste for bad religion. He seems to indicate that no religion is a lesser threat to the true faith than hypocritical religion.

What Do We Do?

Wait, watch and work. While Jesus points to a few indicators that portend the end times, he doesn't indicate that a fixation on "signs of the times" is a primary form of readiness. The best approach to readiness is to apply ourselves to his way of life – preaching the kingdom gospel and living kingdom values and teachings. Jesus could not be clearer. We are supposed to reach the world with truth and love, faith and mercy, justice and compassion. We are supposed to teach believers to be disciples and apprentices of Christ. We are supposed to build the kingdom on earth – a network of communities and outposts to carry on the work.

Forever, we've tended to separate away parts of our mission. Seasons and movements in Christian history have neglected the call to help and heal the world in favor of preaching the themes of eternal destiny. Other seasons and movements have neglected preaching about salvation and eternal life in favor of rallying efforts at helping and healing a broken world.

Jesus, obviously, preached both and did both. He pointed to the everlasting kingdom and urged everyone to believe and receive the gift of that blessed hope. He also brought the kingdom and its hearty justice and righteousness into the human dilemma; healed and helped and comforted and resurrected.

But What If I Naturally Lean One Way?

Individuals might be energized, empowered, gifted and called by God to engage one frontier more vigorously than the other. Organizations might even rise up that are geared for evangelism more than compassion or compassion more than evangelism (though evangelism is compassionate and compassion can be quite evangelistic). But the church as a whole, with all parts and persuasion operating as a united conspiracy of love, cannot neglect one for the other.

In the last century, the great schism of the church was over this matter. Churches that felt hesitant about a clear and sure word about an eternal kingdom tended to concentrate, then, on bringing the kingdom to earth with a generous "social gospel." Churches reacting to the social gospel became "evangelical;" reaching the lost with a message of eternal hope, even if the lost continued to languish in an assortment of temporary miseries.

The effect on both “sides” was tragic. Social gospel churches too often lost huge numbers of people and their forces for compassion were constantly diminished by their inattention to evangelism. And the evangelical church too often lost the heart of Jesus for the poor and oppressed and fell out of the habit of advocacy in the mess of human pain.

Today, we’re in a new day. The tired argument between these desperate poles has given way to a new united commitment to what many have called a “two-handed gospel.” Most churches are trying to regain theological clarity around eternal truths and heavenly hopes (unbelieving churches have simply died); and most believing churches are trying to represent Christ and the kingdom of God in the complex world of human suffering.

The simple truth is that love and compassion validate our words of eternal hope. And words of eternal hope do as much or more than any other help to lift people from a place of desperation. Like two sides of a coin, the gospel of the kingdom is all about hope here and hope forever.

So What, Then?

We preach. We help. We advocate. We plant communities and outposts for the gospel message to spread across the planet. We provide fresh water and spiritual drink. We offer real bread and introduce Jesus as the Bread of Life. We stand against injustice and comfort the world with hopes of a place where there will be no warfare or tears or injustice.

We live the Christ life and honor the king.