

Introduction

I'd like to begin by asking you a hypothetical question. Suppose Jesus came back to earth in the flesh, temporarily, and agreed to preach just one sermon at Bethel Friends Church. Question – What would His topic be? What one subject, more than any other, would He want us to know about? We don't have to speculate about that because Matthew and Mark, in 4:17 and 1:15 of their respective gospels, tell us. They reveal what the central message of Jesus was, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."** There's no doubt in my mind. That's what He would preach about if He were here this morning in the flesh. But He isn't and so I'm going to do it for Him, far less capably of course.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Let's start with what Matthew 4:17 calls **"the kingdom of heaven"** and Mark 1:15 **"the kingdom of God."** Those are synonymous terms that Jesus used interchangeably and I'm going to do the same today.

Let's understand them by defining what a kingdom is. An analogy helps us do that. That analogy is the King of Morocco. We would all agree that the nation of Morocco is his kingdom. But what makes it that? The nation of Morocco is his kingdom because what he wants done is done there. Suppose he comes to the United States. Is the United States his kingdom if he does? Of course it isn't because he has no authority here and what he wants done isn't necessarily done.

That helps us understand what the kingdom of God is. It's the range of His effective will. It's the realm in which what He wants done is done. The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:10 makes that clear. In the opening line, we ask that God's kingdom come. In the next line, we ask that His will be done. The second line merely restates the first, which defines God's kingdom. It's the realm in which what He wants done is done.

There are two primary and organizing realities that comprise it. The first is the person of God Himself, the utterly lovely and competent being

we've come to love. The second is the action of His will, that is, the exercise of His power. Those are the primary and organizing realities that comprise His kingdom – His presence and power.

So there you have it - what the kingdom of God is. It's the range of His effective will. Its organizing realities are His person and power.

At Hand

Now, notice what Jesus tells us about that kingdom. It's "**at hand.**" The Greek word translated that indicates a past and completed action. So "**at hand**" means "**has come.**" That implies that the kingdom of God was already in existence when Jesus spoke those words and still is. It's right here all around us and has been since the beginning of history.

But there's something new with the coming of Jesus – accessibility to it. The presence and power of God are available to us right now right where we are. We don't have to wait until we die and go to heaven to experience His presence and power. We can experience them before we die, on earth.

Two dynamic verses teach us just that. One is 1 Corinthians 10:11. Paul refers to we who follow Jesus as those "**upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**" Another verse is Hebrews 6:5. The author of Hebrews refers to us as those "**who have tasted the powers of the age to come.**" The kingdom of heaven is accessible to us fully in our lives after we die. But according to these verses, it's also accessible to us, partially, in our lives before we die. We can experience God's presence and power profoundly right now right where we are.

The Holy Spirit gave me an insight about heaven that I shared last week. We'll shape the very nature and history of heaven itself by the things we achieve and do there. A Christian I know, in the final stages of cancer, was prayed for and healed. And a thin-skinned relative of mine, who decided to follow Jesus, is now "**not provoked**" to quote 1 Corinthians 13:5. He routinely receives criticism with gratitude and joy instead of with the intense and reactionary anger he always did before.

God's presence and power explain all three of those experiences: the revelation, the healing, and the transformation. Those people had those experiences, in other words, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It's right here everywhere around us and available to us.

So, let's **"take it"** to quote Jesus in Matthew 11:12. Let's access it or avail ourselves of it. We will experience God's presence and power if we do. We won't if we don't.

Dallas Willard compares it to electricity. Willard lived in southern Missouri as a child and there was no electricity there. But then the REA extended electrical lines into the area and electricity was at hand. It was available to anyone who wanted it. Almost everyone took it by hooking up to the lines. But a few people didn't. They didn't want to change from the old ways of doing things or couldn't afford it or were afraid of it. And so, they didn't take it.

That is the way it is with the kingdom of heaven. It's at hand and available to everyone, but it's no good to us unless we take it. Some people do, but sadly most don't. They go right on living their lives as if it isn't at hand, and don't experience God's presence and power as a result. Don't be like those foolish people. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. So, take it!

Repent

Jesus tells us how to do that in Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15. Repent! That's how we take the kingdom of heaven at hand. We repent. That means something specific. We integrate our kingdoms into God's. Let me explain, precisely, how we do that.

You and I are in God's image in a variety of ways. One is that we have a kingdom or domain just as He does. That kingdom is the range of our effective will. It's the realm in which what we want done is done. In those terms, anything that we have the say so over is part of our kingdom. A series of questions illustrate what I mean. How many hours of sleep do we get? What do we do for a living? How many hours a week

do we read the Bible? How do we dress? How many calories do we routinely consume in a day? How many children do we have? We have the say so over all of the matters those questions address, and countless more. All of those matters, therefore, are part of our kingdoms.

It's true. Each of us has his or her own kingdom and it's good we do. Having a place of rule goes right to the very heart of who we are – to the very heart of our integrity, competence, and strength. Psychology now recognizes that a sense of having a kingdom, a domain over which we have control, is a vital factor in physical and mental health.

Knowing all of that helps us understand how we take the kingdom of God. We integrate our kingdoms into His. We do that by making His kingdom present in our persons and lives. Remember that His kingdom is the range of His effective will. It's the realm in which what He wants done is done. It can be present, therefore, in any one of three places.

First, it is always present in matter. By matter, I mean atoms in all their combinations and the equations and formulas they involve. All the matter in the universe functions as God wills it to. Think about making bread dough, which requires yeast fermenting sugar into alcohol and carbon dioxide. The atoms and chemical reactions involved in that function as God wants them to. We can make bread dough, in other words, because the kingdom of God is always present in matter.

Second, it can be present in human institutions and organizations. Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying in Calcutta, India, for instance, carries out a specific mission – to enable those who are so poor that they live like animals to die like angels. God wants that and so His kingdom is present in the Home for the Dying.

And finally, third, the kingdom of God can be present in the persons and lives of individuals, which addresses the issue we're thinking about now - how we take it. We take it by making it present in our persons and lives. Or to say in another way, we integrate our kingdoms into God's. That's what our lives with Him are substantially all about, integrating our kingdoms into His. As a practical matter, we do that by giving Him the say so over what we have the say so over. We determine what He wants

in the details of our day-to-day existence. We then make what He wants what we want and act accordingly. That's how we take or access the kingdom of God at hand. Let me illustrate that for you.

Take how we dress, for instance. That's clearly within our kingdoms. We can dress how we want to dress. Four years ago, I preached a sermon titled "Dress the Part" (of a disciple of Jesus) from 1 Timothy 2:9-10. That text reveals how God wants us to dress: modestly, discreetly, and simply, each of which I explained in detail. Several weeks later, someone came to my office and told me that sermon changed how she was dressing. She realized, she said, that she had been dressing immodestly and stopped. Grasp what she did. She gave God the say so over what she had the say so over – how she dressed.

Or take how we respond to accusations. That's clearly within our kingdoms. We can respond how we want to respond. I remember being in a hurry and knocking my wife's bread maker off the counter. When she confronted me about it, I blamed her for setting it so close to the edge. That's what most of us do when we're accused, even if justly. We defend or excuse our actions. That's what we want. But the Bible reveals what God wants. It's that we not defend or excuse ourselves. It's that we be glad to be found out and admit it instead. So that's what I do now. If someone justly accuses me, I don't spin what I did to defend or excuse it. I just admit it and trust the outcome to God. I'm giving Him the say so over what I have the say so over.

Those anecdotes illustrate how we take the kingdom of God at hand. We make it present in our persons and lives. We integrate our kingdoms into His. We give Him have the say so over what we have the say so over. We determine what He wants in the details of our day-to-day existence. We then make what He wants what we want and act accordingly.

Enlarges Our Kingdom

Now, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 reveals what happens when we do that. This Sermon of His occurs in the context of

Matthew 4:17. It is, therefore, an extended commentary on the kingdom at hand. It describes a remarkable kind of person in the most startling of terms. It reveals in doing so what happens to our kingdoms when we integrate them into God's. They're enlarged by His presence and power. His presence and power, in other words, enhance what we ourselves are capable of becoming and doing.

Matthew 5:40 illustrates what I mean. Every defendant in a law suit I've ever known was hostile toward the plaintiff who sued him. Think of a normal defendant. Loving the plaintiff who sued him isn't part of his kingdom. It isn't in him to do that. He isn't capable of that. But the person Jesus describes in 5:40 is. He can do what a normal defendant can't - love the plaintiff, enough that if the plaintiff gets a judgment against him, he gives him more if he needs it. Clearly, God's presence and power have enlarged the kingdom of anyone who would do that.

That's what happens when we integrate our kingdoms into God's. His presence and power enlarge them. They enhance what we're capable of becoming and doing. The great Frank Laubach, whose life was one of moment by moment submission to God, experienced that and described it this way: **"I feel simply carried along each hour, doing my part in a plan which is far beyond myself. This sense of cooperation with God in little things is what astonished me. I need something, and turn around to find it waiting for me. I must work, to be sure, but there is God working along with me."** That description demonstrates what happens when we integrate our kingdoms into God's. His presence and power enlarge them. They enhance what we're capable of becoming and doing.

Conclusion

A global news source called Advertising Age named the 10 best advertising slogans of all time. The second on their list was Nike's celebrated slogan, **"Just do it."** I close this morning with that challenge modified. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Just take it!