

Thy Kingdom Come

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Matthew 6:7-15

Sermon Series:
Pray Daily: Igniting
Our Passion for God

There is something missing in American churches today, something essential. Our churches have lost their passion for God.

Last Sunday, our church launched Pray Daily, a 90-day prayer initiative. We invite you to join us in daily prayer this summer. The Pray Daily guide, prepared by people in our church, is intended to support this effort. It provides a daily Bible reading, suggested meditation and possible action step. It is designed to fit into your pocket or purse. You can use it as a catalyst for prayer as well as reference it when you are stuck in traffic or waiting in a check-out line.

Some of you had every intention of participating but just forgot. You became sidetracked this week with temporal, more pressing matters. So, try again! Pick up tomorrow on day 9, and join us for 82 days of prayer.

Some of you are reluctant to Pray Daily. You may be cynical about prayer. "I prayed for something once and nothing happened." Do you have that same attitude toward other things that initially don't turn out the way you want? The first week I received my driver's license, I had an accident, but that didn't deter me from future driving.

For some of you, the concept of daily prayer is new and awkward. In the movie *Christmas Vacation*, Chevy Chase plays the part of a goofy dad named Clark Griswald. In one memorable scene, Clark and his family are gathered together at

the dinner table for a festive Christmas meal. Clark stands at one end of the table, carving the turkey and reveling in the joy of the occasion. He raps his silverware against a water glass to get everyone's attention. "Since this is Aunt Bethany's 80th Christmas, I think she should lead us in saying the grace." Aunt Bethany is hard of hearing, so she leans over to her elderly husband and yells, "What?"

"He wants you to say grace," her husband answers.

"Grace? Grace has been dead for 30 years," says Aunt Bethany.

"No," her husband replies, "he wants you to say the blessing."

"Oh!" says Aunt Bethany. She bows her head and clasps her hands. One thing is painfully obvious. Each family member feels awkward in this sacred moment. Some fold their hands. Everyone looks positively uncomfortable. Aunt Bethany closes her eyes and begins, "I pledge allegiance to the flag," and everyone follows suit, "of the United States of America."

We want prayer to become less awkward and more comfortable this summer. We want you to discover the vitality of daily prayer.

The byline accompanying this Pray Daily effort expresses our purpose: "Igniting Our Passion for God." There is something missing in American churches today, something essential. Too many churches function like institutions, offering

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programs to religious consumers. Our churches have lost their passion for God. All you need to do is confess Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you win a free ticket to heaven. Passionless Christianity, we might call it.

Fathers lag well behind in passionate Christianity. Although fathers are given major responsibility for children's Christian instruction, we have, for the most part, checked out!

Passion derives from the Latin "pasha," meaning to suffer. Originally, this word had less to do with pain and more to do with giving oneself in love to someone else. Of course, passion can be co-opted for evil as well as good, as evidenced today by fanatical jihad and dis-ordered lust.

Passion, rightly understood, entails being loved by God and loving God in return. Ninety days of prayer is intended to help us (re)discover how much God loves us. I said two Sundays ago the first thing that catches God's attention is not our sin. What first catches God's notice is love. God loves us passionately!

The Lord's Prayer is designed to teach us how to pray. This model prayer is given in response to the disciples's question, "Lord, teach us how to pray." We're not the only ones who struggle with how to pray.

Our focus for the next several Sundays is the six petitions of the Lord's Prayer. As I said last Sunday, the first three petitions pertain to God: your name, your kingdom and your will while the last three

pertain specifically to us: our bread, our debts and our temptations.

We come today to the second temptation, "Thy kingdom come." We pray "Thy kingdom come" every Sunday, but I suspect many of us aren't sure what, on earth, we are praying.

When was the last time, if ever, you heard a sermon on the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God occupies a pivotal place in Jesus' teaching ministry. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus references the kingdom of God and its cognate "kingdom of heaven" 53 times. Jesus begins his ministry with the words, "The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus says, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again" (John 3:3-5). Most of Jesus' parables are, in actuality, parables about the kingdom of God.

I direct you to John 18:33-37 for help in understanding the kingdom of God. Jesus has been brought to Pilate for sentencing. Pilate begins his line of questioning with the words, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus answers Pilate's question with an inquiry of his own. "Do you ask this [question] on your own or did others tell you about me?"

Pilate snaps back, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus responds, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom was from the world, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the

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Jews.... My kingdom is not from here.”

“So you are a king?” Pilate asks.

Jesus replies, “You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into this world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Jesus stands before Pilate as an accused criminal. His scourged back and thorn-encircled head are painful reminders of who exercises control. Yet, Jesus doesn't act the least bit intimidated. Pilate is the one showing fear. It must have been disarming for Pilate to encounter such a resolute, unarmed prisoner. One exercises worldly control, the other demonstrates authentic power. Although Pilate appears in control, Jesus exhibits real power.

In 1984, police were engaged in a massive manhunt for Riley Arzeneaux, a convicted murderer who had escaped from prison. Riley barged into the home of Louise and Nathan Degrafinried, an elderly couple who lived in a rural town outside Nashville, and were active members of the Mount Sinai Baptist Church. Riley pointed a shotgun at them, shouting, “Don't make me kill you.”

Now, here's the astonishing part. Louise said to their intruder, “Young man, I am a Christian lady. I don't believe in no violence. Put down that gun and you sit down. I don't allow no violence here.” Riley put the gun on the couch.

“Lady,” he said, “I'm hungry. I haven't eaten in three days.” Louise calmly asked her husband to get dry socks for their guest while she made breakfast. She put out her best napkins. When they sat down to eat, Louise took Riley's shaking hand, “Young man, let's give thanks that you came here and are safe.” She prayed and asked if there was anything he would like to say to the Lord. Riley couldn't think of anything so she suggested, “Just say, ‘Jesus wept.’”

Later, a journalist asked how she happened to use that Bible text. She explained, “Because I figured that he didn't have no church background so I wanted to start him off simple, something short, you know.”

After breakfast, Louise asked about Riley's family and learned of his sad upbringing. Riley, trembling all over, said that no one in this world cared about him. “Young man, I love you and God loves you. God loves all of us, every one of us, especially you. Jesus died for you because he loves you so much.”

A short time later, they heard the approaching sirens. “The police are gonna kill me when they get here,” Riley said. Louise told Riley to stay put while she went out to talk to the police. You can picture the scene. Police staked out the house with guns drawn. Standing on her porch, she spoke to the police exactly as she had to Riley. “Y'all put those guns away. I don't allow no violence here.” Louise and Nathan then escorted Riley to a waiting police car.

May your kingdom come through me, may your kingdom be seen in how I live my life today.

Louise kept in regular contact with Riley in prison. He specifically remembers praying with Louise. “She started off her prayers,” he recalled, “by saying, ‘God, this is your child Louise. You know me and I know you.’ That’s the kind of relationship I want to have with God,” Riley said.

In 1988, Riley gave his life to Christ. In 1998, after his parole, he spoke at Louise’s funeral. Riley now lives and works in Nashville, a changed man! Riley had the control, but Louise had the power. The power evidenced that day Riley burst into her house was kingdom power, the power of love.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Jesus does not reign by brute force or intimidation. His kingdom involves denying self and taking up the cross, loving enemies and turning the other cheek.

Jesus’ kingdom is not political. There are no geographical boundaries or capital city in Jesus’ kingdom. He has no standing army.

The devil tempts Jesus with all the kingdoms of this world if only he will worship him. Jesus refuses (Matthew 4:9). His kingdom is not the worldly kind.

Matthew 13 is a chapter full of kingdom parables. The kingdom of God is like seed sown in the ground (18-23) and yeast mixed into the dough (33). The kingdom of God grows mysteriously and imperceptibly until it fills the world with love.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*, describes how small events can have huge, even epic consequences. “Look at the world around you,” he writes. “It may seem like an immovable,

implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push in just the right spot it can be tipped.”

He cites the example of Hush Puppy shoes. The classic suede shoe with the crepe sole called the Duke and the slip-on with the golden buckle known as the Columbia were barely selling 65,000 pairs in 1990. The company wanted to walk away from the casual suede look entirely. But in 1994, shoe executives saw a strange spike in the sales of these shoes. Sales jumped that year to 430,000. The following year, sales rose to 1.6 million. It turns out the popularity of Hush Puppy shoes in the mid ’90s could be traced to a few teenagers in the East Village of New York City. They started buying old pairs from thrift shops. They thought the shoes were cool. And because they were cool, other kids thought the shoes were cool. Somehow the trend took on a life of its own. Soon major fashion designers were buying them for their models to accessorize spring fashions. Some things that start small achieve enormous results.

We don’t pray God’s kingdom into existence when we ask for God’s kingdom to come. God’s kingdom has already come through Jesus Christ. His kingdom is already here, yet still to come.

When I asked our staff in worship this week to describe the kingdom of God in their own language, our Preschool Director said it best, “The kingdom of God is living the life God wants for us.” (Leave it to preschool teachers to say it succinctly!) May your kingdom come through me, may your kingdom be seen in how I live my life today.

