

# The Kingdom of God

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Mark 1:14-15

Sermon Series: The  
Kingdom of God

*Your kingdom  
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Every person has a kingdom—a realm that is uniquely your own. Your kingdom is the place where you have a say over what happens. Having a say over something is what places it within your realm or kingdom.

My primary kingdom is 1881 Cold Creek Court in Vienna, Va. I have at least some say over what happens there. I share this fiefdom with my co-ruler, Chris, my wife. We have one lone subject in our kingdom—a rather independent cat named Eve. Sometimes she listens to us, most of the time she ignores us. We had two other relatively loyal subjects in our kingdom at one time, Andrew and Emily, our children. They lived under our domain for years, but now they have established kingdoms of their own.

My other kingdom is located at 124 Park Street in Vienna. I call it my kingdom, since I have some say over what takes place here. There are considerably more subjects in this kingdom. A lot of them are like our cat Eve. Sometimes they listen to me, sometimes they don't!

That's pretty much the extent of my kingdom. My domain is, granted, rather limited. I try to extend my domain into other realms. For instance, I play on an intramural basketball team com-

posed largely of players from this church. We have a good time, but let me tell you, we take it very seriously. We want to win. Our team won the "B" league championship of the intramural Legends league. I have a trophy to show for it. No doubt, you're impressed. We are legends all right, legends in our own minds.

Each of us aspires to be somebody in our kingdoms. But not many people notice—they are building little kingdoms of their own.

There's a bigger kingdom out there, friends—the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is huge. His kingdom is so large that "Heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool" (Isaiah 66:1). We read last Sunday from 1st Chronicles that "the Lord is king" (16:31). "Our God reigns," Scripture declares (Isaiah 52:7). His kingdom will never end (Psalm 145:13).

We tend to associate a kingdom with a geographical region over which a monarch reigns. But the kingdom of God is not a political or geographical kingdom. It has no protected borders or standing army.

The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom. It's radically different from any other earthly kingdom you've ever seen. Everything about this kingdom is turned upside down. This kingdom involves turning the other cheek and walking the second mile. It's a place where the first go

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last and the last go first. It's a place where those who try to hoard life lose it, and those who give life away end up finding it.

The kingdom of God turns out to be central to Jesus' teaching. Jesus announced in our Scripture lesson that the "time has been fulfilled" (Mark 1:14). A decisive moment has arrived. "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). It turns out that the phrase "The kingdom of God has come near" is a common theme in the gospels (Matthew 4:17; 10:7; Luke 10:9, 11; 21:31).

We prayed earlier this morning, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." What precisely are we praying when we petition God for thy kingdom to come and thy will to be done?

Whenever Jesus is asked to explain his coming, he answers in terms of the kingdom of God. That's why this phrase appears 15 times in the gospel of Mark, 40 times in the gospel of Luke and 50 times in the gospel of Matthew. Incidentally, Matthew substitutes the phrase "kingdom of heaven" for "kingdom of God" in his gospel. Matthew writes his gospel to a primarily Jewish audience, who were careful not to utter the name of God out loud for fear of breaking the third command, about profaning the name of the Lord.

If the kingdom of God is this important to Jesus, what explains the church's silence in speaking about it? When was the last time you heard a sermon on the kingdom of God? I searched my sermon archives and came up

empty. That's why we are devoting three months worth of sermons to plumbing the depths of what Jesus meant by the term.

I considered passing out index cards this morning to ask for your input about what you know about the kingdom of God. I expected to receive quite a few blank cards in return. I also anticipated that some of you would identify the kingdom of God as someplace you go after you die, if, in fact, you go there.

Philip Pullman is an award winning British novelist. His best known trilogy of books is a series called *His Dark Materials*. The first book in the trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, is a movie currently showing in theaters everywhere, although the film is not doing as well as producers had hoped.

Pullman has attracted the ire of many Christians for his searing critique of the church. The church, called the Magisterium in his novels, is largely responsible for the world's tyranny. Its clergy are depicted as bigoted, misguided zealots. In Pullman's view, the church has foisted on its followers a ruse called the kingdom of God. Pullman claims the kingdom of God is a hoax perpetrated by the powerful in the church to suppress the poor.

Over against the kingdom of God, Pullman introduces in his novels the "republic of heaven." In this earthly republic, people build their own happiness in the here and now. "I believe in the absolute preciousness of the here and now," Pullman writes. "Here is where we are and now is where we live." It's up to each person to build a republic

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of heaven where they are because, in Pullman's words, "there is no elsewhere." Let me read you what he says about this republic:

"It's time to think about a republic of heaven instead of a kingdom of heaven because the king is dead. That is, to say, I believe that the king is dead. I'm an atheist. Nevertheless, we need all the things that heaven meant. We need joy, we need a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. We need a connection with the universe. We need all of the things the kingdom of heaven used to promise but failed to deliver. And, furthermore, we need it in the world where we exist—not elsewhere, because there is no elsewhere."

Pullman is horribly deceived about God and the church. Someday his godless republic will fall like a house of cards. But he is right about one thing. In the church, we have regarded the kingdom of God as something future and altogether otherworldly. We have portrayed the kingdom of God as a blessed heavenly state for all who profess Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. We have described the kingdom of God as something otherworldly, when, in fact, just the opposite is the case.

When Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God, he talked about it as a present reality. It has future dimensions, to be sure, but in nearly every instance in the gospels when Jesus speaks about

the kingdom of God, he describes it in terms of its nearness.

Let me take you back to our morning lesson, to Jesus' words, "The kingdom of God has come near (Mark 1:14-15). The term "has come near" indicates a past and completed action. It is best translated as "has come." The kingdom of God is not something to be entered into later; it is something to be entered into now!

Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of God is not only something that belongs to the next world, it's something entered into in this world. Jesus not only instructs people on how to get to heaven, he tells them how to get heaven into earth. The kingdom of God may not be of this world, but it is for this world. The kingdom of God is not only something we wait for, it's something we work for.

How, then, do we enter the kingdom of God? Jesus said to his followers, "Unless you are born from above, you cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Jesus said, "Unless you change and become as a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 18:5).

How do we enter the kingdom of God? Jesus said, "Repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). The Greek word for repent, *metanoia*, is where we derive our English word metamorphosis. Repent literally means to turn around and go in a new direction. Repentance involves a deliberate turning—we turn away from evil

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and turn toward God. When we repent, we go in a new direction. Repent is a call to recalibrate how we live our lives.

Some of you drive cars equipped with GPS navigation systems. When you become lost, you hear this sweet, audible voice, “recalibrating.” Your navigation system is recalibrating your exact location, to route you in a new direction.

Whenever we repent, we change course and go in a new direction. We recalibrate.

“Repent and believe the gospel,” Jesus said. Jesus is not talking about belief in an intellectual sense. Belief means to place our absolute trust and confidence in the gospel—the good news of God’s saving love in Jesus Christ.

I said at the outset of this sermon that each of us has a kingdom—a realm that is uniquely our own. Jesus invites us to become a part of a dynamic, spiritual kingdom. His kingdom will have no end.

Some of us are so strong-willed that we insist on running our own little kingdoms. Some of us, sad to say, are still trying to run our own show.

Why not become part of the kingdom of God? You can access this kingdom from your heart with your mouth, by professing Jesus Christ as the Lord and Master of your life. “Repent and believe the gospel.” The decisive moment has arrived. “The kingdom of God has come near.”

