

**ABOUT GOD'S KINGDOM
AND WHAT GOD DEMANDS OF HIS PEOPLE**

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Jesus' first act when he began his ministry was to declare God's kingdom to be at hand and He followed that with much teaching on the nature and demands of being a member of that kingdom. These teachings are central to our salvation and faithfulness in keeping our Lord's commandments.

The following discussion answers many questions about Christ's kingdom: Is this kingdom present now or to be established at some future time? What does it mean that this kingdom is one of righteousness? Why don't the citizens of this kingdom fight and war as do the citizens of the nations of the earth? How does our Lord expect us to live out our lives as citizens of His kingdom? In short, what kind of life is expected of us? And, if we fail to keep our Lord's commandments after being saved, isn't our salvation still assured, not still born? Isn't this what forgiveness of sin is all about? *Or is it?* Is there more?

This presentation uses a very old device: a dialogue between an inquirer and one who is well established in the New Life. Such a device has been a favorite vehicle to explore ideas and teachings since the time of the Greek philosophers and the early Christians. Both groups used the device with excellent results because of the clarity and ease of understanding the exchange.

-Terry Wallace

I'm so confused about Jesus. We seem surrounded by a legion of voices all crying different things, demanding our attention and allegiance. Militant atheists say there is no god. Thousands of voices, calling themselves Christians or "true Christians," or "the only real Christians," demand I heed and obey all they say. Some preach a cosmic Christ; others, a historical Jesus. The Jesus Seminar – that loose group of ultra-liberal thinkers – claim that there's only perhaps one sentence in the Bible that Jesus really may have spoken – something they arrived at by voting!

The Jesus Seminar? Yes. They are a hoot, aren't they? They're like bad kitchen help peeling back the layers of an onion until there's nothing left. However, Jesus warned us we'd find ourselves surrounded by such voices, calling us to look everywhere, but where we should. For instance, He warned: "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." Jesus warned His disciples, "The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other (Luke 17:20-24).

That's spot on!

Yes, and consider what Jesus asked His disciples as they rested at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do men say that I am?" Notice His disciples' initial answers: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matthew 16:14). All over the place – everyone with his own take – just like today.

Yes! Ten thousand contradictory interpretations. Utter confusion! How are we to figure out which one is right?!

Let's read on about that time in Caesarea Philippi! I think we'll find it most illuminating. After the confusion of the initial answers, notice that Jesus asks His disciples a far more pointed question:

“Who do YOU say that I am?” That’s much different than who do MEN say that I am. Indeed, the disciples had answered the first question correctly. Now, to this new and far more important question, Simon Peter gives the answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” Whoa! Where did he get that answer? Notice: Jesus tells us: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonah, for my Father in Heaven has revealed this to you.”

The right answer...

...comes from the source! God Himself...and not the chattering class of professional theorists who love to explore all manner of dubious ideas, many in the interest of creating what they say is the development of “new knowledge.”

Hmmmm. OK. If it is God who reveals to us that Jesus is the Christ: that makes what Jesus’ taught all-important, does it not?

Absolutely.

Well, then, what does Jesus say is central?

Again, the right question!

OK. Let’s start with it: what was the focus of Jesus’ preaching as He began His Ministry?

Yes. Let’s go to the source, Jesus Himself. See what He said, instead of listening to what everybody claims He said.

When Jesus emerged from His confrontations with Satan in the Wilderness and returned to Galilee, we’re told “from that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’”

How important, how central, is Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom being at hand, to us, to our lives? Where should it fit in our priorities of family, making a living, etc.?

We are to put our seeking of His kingdom before even our most basic needs, like food and clothing. Jesus tells us “...your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Really? It’s that important? Putting the kingdom before our basic needs?

We should be ready to give up everything for it. The kingdom is *that* important. Study the parable of the Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44). It is a hidden treasure so important that we should sell all we have and buy it. Or study the parable of the pearl: When the merchant found the pearl of great value, “he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45). Yes, the kingdom is worth everything.

I’ll grant that, but hasn’t Jesus added something to His opening declaration that “the kingdom of heaven is near?” Now He says “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.”

No. Righteousness was part of opening declaration. Remember His very first word? “Repent!” Turn from disobedience to God’s commandments, turn from your evil and wrong doing, turn from unrighteousness and self-righteous, hypocrisy, violence, betrayal, coveting, stealing.”

I guess, yes, that was part of His announcement of the kingdom of God, but exactly what type of kingdom is this? We know what the kingdoms and governments of the world are like. We know the Jews of Jesus’ time expected a similar kingdom to those of the world, different largely in the fact that it would be victorious and dominant.

Your question is an excellent one and one that Jesus took great pains to answer from His first announcement that the kingdom was at hand, through His teaching about the nature of that kingdom in His parables, to His final descriptions of His kingdom as He faced and answered Pilate’s questions.

I grant that Jesus’ understanding of His kingdom is clearly different from what the Jews of His time envisioned. It almost seems to me that He’s describing a future kingdom that He will establish on His return at the End of Days, a spiritual kingdom established by the power of God at sometime in the future, but for now we’re left with dealing with the kingdoms of this world. Our hope is in the Lord who made heaven and earth, and who has taken Christ Jesus home to await the final confrontation.

But that would be saying, “the kingdom of God is near, is at hand, but not that near, and not that close at hand.” Jesus isn’t announcing some future kingdom to be established at the End of Days. In fact, your assertion that Jesus has gone away to heaven to come again some other day, that day being the End of Days, is directly contradicted by Jesus. You make Jesus sound neither present nor powerful among us.

But He left! That’s what the ascension is all about, isn’t it?

No. He didn’t leave. He ascended to His Father; that is, He reassumed His place with the Father. Yet, He and His Father are still here, still among us, present and powerful, leading, teaching, and directing us. Consider that “we live and move and have our being in God,” that He created and sustains all we see. God is not way out there somewhere at the edge of the universe. It has been created and is knit together by His power and presence. God is not “up there” above the clouds or out in space. Paul tells us “The righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, Who will ascend into heaven? (that is, who will bring Christ down) or Who will descend into the deep? (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart...’” (Romans 10:6-8). This is the truth emphasized earlier by Isaiah, “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’” (30:21).

But, but, but, wasn’t there the Father first creating the world, then the Son, and finally when He left us, He left us the Holy Spirit. Isn’t that what the Scriptures say?

Neither the Scriptures nor Jesus characterize things as you have done. You may have thought you read it in the Scriptures, but this is not what Christ Himself tells us. Here! Let’s consult some the Scriptures on this subject, for instance John 14:15-21:

“If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot

accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him, and show myself to him.”

Dear friend, read this passage carefully, again and again. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: *These three are One!* This is how our Lord can say “I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” Is not the Father, the Father of Lights? Is not the Son the Light of the World, the Light within you? Does not Christ Jesus say, “I came into the world, to testify to the truth”? (John 18:37). Is He not one with the Counselor, the Spirit of Truth? Is Jesus not known as “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace?” (Isaiah 9:6b).

Yes! I see. As God said from the beginning: “I, the Lord thy God, am one God!”

But let’s not lose sight of God’s kingdom.

Yes! We were slipping away from it in our exchange: So this kingdom is not “out there” sometime in the future. It is now?

It is *now!* And its king is Jesus, as He declared to Pilate: “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason, I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” (John 18:37).

Then His kingdom is in the world!

Yes, and no. In the world, but not of the world. Jesus, Himself, emphasizes this: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” Clearly, this kingdom is not like the kingdoms of the world, whose servants and armies fight and kill one another. Paul, too, emphasizes this fact: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Sounds like one powerful kingdom, but not of military might, apparently.

No, not one of military might. It, rather, seems at first insignificant, almost invisible, utterly weak, but don’t be fooled. It grows and expands and becomes exceptionally powerful. Consider Jesus’ Parable of the Mustard Seed: “Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches” (Matthew 13:31-32). Or consider the parable of the kingdom being like yeast, that, mixed with much flour, works its way all through the dough! Yeast seems to be invisible, but as it works, it produces amazing and life sustaining results. We may think nothing is happening. We may be unaware of the kingdom expanding, working through everything, but that doesn’t mean it is absent or inactive. Think of how surprised the Roman Empire was by the “mustard seed” planted in Judea.

Consider the yeast of the disciples' faith as it expanded mostly unseen and quietly through the ancient world.

But this description of God's kingdom, it raises a crucial question we've not addressed, doesn't it?

Like what?

Like the fact that our world is already full of kingdoms, of governments, and now Jesus announces that God is about to plant His kingdom among them.

Yes, that's what God has done!

Ah! But we know that anytime two kingdoms, two governments, try to rule the same people, there will inevitably be conflict. It's like that physical law that two entities can't occupy the same space? One must be dominant and the result will be that the dominant kingdom subsumes, subordinates, or extinguishes the weaker.

That is certainly true of our world, so I grant your argument so far.

So, don't we need to look at God's kingdom in relation to the governments of the world? Will there be conflict between them? Which must be dominant? How will that competition be resolved?

Which we should serve, as it were?

Yes! Can't we adroitly serve both? Meld the best of both? Especially if the worldly government is friendly to God's government?

These are challenging questions, ones of great weight, and, absolutely, they need to be answered. Let's consider them and consider them most carefully, as if our souls depended on them, which in reality they do.

OK. So need there be conflict between God's kingdom and an enlightened human government? Obviously there will be conflict with an unenlightened government.

I'm quite unclear concerning what would be an enlightened human government, but I'm going to side step that concern, because I don't think the result – enlightened or unenlightened – will be any different. Jesus was utterly plain that there will be conflict, emphasizing and re-emphasizing it, with His disciples.

Obviously, so if the State has the military and police power to enforce its dominance, it appears in any conflict the governments of this world will rule over God's kingdom.

Whoa! Slow down. You're making an easy, snap judgment, and lots of very powerful emperors, dictators, and demagogues have done the same. Let's approach this from a less carnal, more thoughtful perspective. Let's first ask what is demanded of us and who should take priority in our lives – man or God?

Like what sort of allegiance does God expect? And what does man, with his governments, expect?

God has been very clear on the allegiance He expects, both in the Old and New Testaments. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Our Lord seeks our love, our heart, our soul, our mind – all of them, complete allegiance and obedience.

But haven't human governments from time immemorial sought the same complete allegiance and obedience from their subjects?

How very right you are! Most states, even what you might term your modern, enlightened, democratic governments claim the same omni-competence in matters both temporal and spiritual. Consider the Catholic and Protestant State Churches. Or consider the United States government through legislation and its courts determining when citizens may pray and when they may not. Notice those “super enlightened” elitist, progressive, socialist, and communist governments which abolished freedom of conscience, declared atheism to be the law of the land, and herded multitudes of simple Christians into camps and graves, sheep to the slaughter.

But doesn't that simply prove my point: the State has the military and police power to enforce its dominance and, in any conflict, the governments of this world will rule over God's kingdom. Those who seek to follow God's commandments will be persecuted, slaughtered, annihilated! You'd think God would have foreseen this!

He did.

He did?!

And our Lord warns us of this conflict again and again in the clearest terms. Consider this from the Matthew 5:11, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Jesus is blunt in the 15th chapter of John: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

But that is so unreasonable!

Indeed it is, but as our Lord and His scriptures observe: “They hated me without reason.”

But is this not now the Age of Reason? Hasn't it been for the last three hundred years?!

I suspect if the slaughtered tens of millions from the past century could speak from their graves, their voices would shout a deafening “NO!”

The Apostle Paul likewise warns us: “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:12-13). And Paul wasn't speaking theoretically. It was a fact he experienced at every step in his ministry.

Well, then, we should fight back against such wrong, such injustice! We must exact an eye for an eye, a life for a life!

No! Never! This is not what our Lord calls us to. Remember what He said before Pilate, when His own life was at stake? “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36).

Then what in heaven’s name are we to do!? Throw leaves and twigs in the air to scare our attackers away, like angry gorillas?!

In heaven’s name, heaven gives this answer in Jesus’ own words: “You have heard that it was said, ‘eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.... You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:38-41, 43-45).

Nice idea, but that doesn’t always work. A determined and hateful enemy can still kill you and yours.

Yes, as the enemies of our Lord killed Him. Yet, we look to our Lord and look beyond this life, because there is more than simply here and now. Seemingly conquered at a moment in time, we become more than conquerors. Consider the apostle Paul’s words:

“What then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. We shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who love us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:31-39).

I don’t know....

Yes?

There’s got to be another way, less drastic, less dangerous and less challenging.

Like?

Like, can’t we create some hybrid of God’s kingdom and the kingdoms of humanity, in an effort to avoid these disastrous collisions and conflicts? I still think some melding of the two, some adroit footwork, could bring this about.

In spite of much evidence to the contrary...

What evidence to the contrary?

Such hybrids, as you call them, have been tried all through history and none of them have worked. They go by many names: State Churches, Constantinian Christianity, the Omni-competent State, the divine right of kings....

And some good came from each, did it not? The Emperor Constantine outlawed rampant abortion within the Roman Empire, stopped persecution of Christians, rebuilt their churches, labored against the terribly violent and murderous games.

Indeed some modicum of good came from his reign and from many of the other hybrids, but what was lost?

What was lost?

For a modicum of good, we received a legion of the world's evils. Soon Christians were killing one another and great numbers of innocent people. The Emperor's laws, not Christ's laws, governed humanity. Theft, murder, covetousness, adultery were permitted or winked at, as they always have been by the world. But most important, our hearts and souls and minds were now divided: we no longer loved our Lord with *all* our hearts and souls and minds, or our neighbors as ourselves. Our hearts were partly the State's and partly God's, and that hybrid, as you yourself confessed earlier, can't stand. One must dominate. To avoid the collisions between these two kingdoms, you must collude with evil.

America? Things are so much better here. We have religious liberty...

Careful. You may be jumping to unwarranted conclusions.

How so? I have freedom of conscience!

As I said, be careful. Most would agree that infanticide is evil, but the State proclaims it as a right under certain conditions, a right that has led to millions of infant deaths. If you're a pharmacist, but your conscience tells you should not dispense "morning after pills," you may well find yourself in conflict with the State that says you legally must. Our Lord tells us, "Do not commit adultery," but adultery and pornography are protected civil rights and the sexual revolution bodes more and more changes in these areas. Our Lord tells us not to covet, but our entire culture and government shout "Covet big time!" The State even determines when and where it is permissible to pray and whether or not its citizens can wear religious symbols. The State gives its blessing to, and encourages divorce, through no-fault divorce laws – and has, in effect, abolished the marriage contract. I can go on, but need I?

I'm stunned. I'm at a loss of words for the present.

You see, if we love our Lord with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and our neighbor as ourselves, we must inevitably come into conflict with this world – and, when you open your ears, you will hear the hateful denunciations already being leveled at God's faithful people.

This is staggering! Where does that leave the individual, people like me? How then shall we live?!

Well, yes, where does it? Where does it leave the small, insignificant souls in this world, the yeasty ones even, invisible, living their little everyday lives? And...as you exclaimed...how shall we live?

You don't make us sound very important! Isn't the individual the most important person in the world?! Isn't Jesus supposed to be my personal savior?

Oh, every soul is significant, of inestimable worth, and our Lord would have all to be saved, if they would simply respond to His love. Remember, Jesus is the Shepherd of the Sheep...and we're the sheep, a flock, as well as individuals. And yes, we are sheep, whether we like the metaphor or not. We easily wander, get lost, fall prey to predators, simply get into the most appalling dangers. Wolves and lions like individuals. Wolves and lions focus on the sick, the weak, those who go off on their own. How like Satan, wolves and lions can be!

Let's consider ourselves. Are we in control of our lives? We'd like to think so, but we're not. Are we bright and decisive? We may think so, sighing, "Thank God I'm not like other men and women," but in reality, we are like other men and women! And when the world catches us up by the heels, we're left wondering how it happened! Jesus tells us "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as" are like little children (Matthew 19:14). Consider children: in need of direction, teaching. Children are fragile creatures, easily hurt, in need of protection and help. It is their trust and openness in seeking Jesus that mirrors what should be our own humble response to Him.

You seem to be suggesting that faith in Jesus is far more than a personal thing, that I shouldn't act like it's nobody else's business what I believe, that I've missed something, if I only have a personal relationship with Him.

Nothing wrong with a personal relationship with Jesus, in and of itself, but that's only a starting point. There's no such thing as a flock of one, a kingdom of one. Children require mother and father, sisters and brothers, kith and kin, to grow and prosper. The self centered upon itself, lost in itself, is both one of the most typical and most regrettable aberrations of humanity. The self centered upon itself is a delusional self in need of healing.

What am I to do? Simply believe in God?

That's a start, but don't stop there. I'd take it further than simply believing in God. As the scriptures observe, even the demons do that.

Further?

Because our Lord and His apostles say believing in God is only the beginning.

What else?

What our Lord has told us since the beginning: Keep His commandments. You know, the very definition of love is to keep our Lord's commandments. You can take the short positive list (the two great commandments) or turn the coin over for the longer negative list: (the ten "thou shall not" commandments). Or you can even follow the apostles' instructions in their epistles (like Paul's 12th chapter of Romans). Keeping His commandments is how we should live, how we must live, if we believe in Him and faithfully live according to His will.

Keeping the commandments – is that really so important? After all, we’re sinners! We’re going to sin and always will, but God has forgiven us through Christ Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and our salvation is assured. We can’t lose it, in spite of what we do.

Oh, my! Do you realize what you’re saying: that God can only save us in our sin, not from our sin. That rather than being almighty, His power is beaten by sin and evil. That’s neither logical nor biblical. Such a belief is a recipe for disaster.

But you expect the impossible!

No. With our Lord, all things are possible. Look to His power, seek His power. Don’t rely simply on your own strength, for that strength is weak, feeble, and illusory. I agree with you that expecting ourselves to avoid sin in our own wills is impossible, but *only impossible without our Lord.*

But...

But if we live in His power and presence, we can keep His commandments and our Lord warns us many times that we will be judged by the fruits we produce. Jesus is often blunt, as we find Him in Matthew 7:21-23: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!’”

Our Lord reiterates this many times, but perhaps nowhere so bluntly as in His teaching on separating the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Read it very carefully, for it puts the lie to those who say we will be saved in spite of our sins, that our salvation can’t be lost. Why, otherwise, repent, if the reward for repenting and turning back is the same as for being faithful?

This is serious business.

Should our lives not be? Our joy in this life and the next is in the balance. John, the apostle, put it this way:

“This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.... This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything” (1 John 3:11, 16-20).