

2. Basic Training for Subjects of the King

The major theme in Jesus' teaching is the kingdom of God. The word kingdom appears over 100 times in the four Gospels compared to only three references to the church. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17; cf. Mark 1:14-15). He spent much of his ministry traveling through all the towns and villages of Galilee and Judea, announcing the message of the kingdom to thousands of people (Luke 4:43-44; 8:1). Proclaiming, demonstrating, and teaching the kingdom are the essence of Jesus' public ministry.

If we are going to change the world like Jesus, however, and invite people to submit to his rule, then we must surely submit to it ourselves. One important prerequisite for empowering subjects is that we indeed be subjects of the King! We don't dare commend something to others that we don't take seriously in our own lives. What's more, the example of God ruling our own lives will be an important teaching aid to help people see what it means for them to come under the rule of God. It is imperative that we truly understand God's kingdom and also reflect it in our lives.

Obviously, we will not submit to God's kingship totally and perfectly. Thankfully, though, our King is merciful and benevolent. He is willing to forgive us, and he will use us in spite of our weaknesses.

Still, we do need to take his kingship seriously. The material in this section is intended to help us grow in our understanding of the kingdom and our own submission to the King. In a sense, it will be an overview of the teaching about the kingdom, not for the purpose of understanding only, however, but so that we will actually submit to the King in our lives. You might say this lesson is *basic training for subjects of the King*. You are urged to stop and read the cited Scriptures for any point that is not clear to you.

There is a lot to read here and several questions for you to write out answers to. Before you go any further, however, skip to the end and read the two practical applications so you will know where this is headed and so that you plan your work to include time to take the applications seriously.

Meaning of Kingdom

The primary reference of kingdom in the phrase "kingdom of God" is not the realm in which the King rules but rather to His rule itself. The word means kingship, reign, rule, or sovereignty. The word refers to what a king has over his people. To put it simply and bluntly, the kingdom of God means God wants to rule your life, and the question is, Will you submit to him?

Scholars consistently provide this definition of the word kingdom, and the usage of the word in the Bible verifies it. The simplest example is in the Lord's prayer where "Your kingdom come" is used in parallel with "your will be done." God's kingdom consists of the will of the King being done.

Similarly, in Psalm 145, the words used in parallel with kingdom are "power," "mighty deeds," and "dominion" (vv. 10-13). The kingdom of God is the power, mighty deeds, and dominion of God.

This meaning is also clear in the parable of the Ten Minas, a parable Jesus told to clarify the nature of the kingdom (Luke 19:11). He said a nobleman went on a journey to "receive for himself a *kingdom*" but his citizens hated him and said, "We do not want this man to *reign* over us" (vv. 12-14). They recognized that for him to *receive a kingdom* meant he would be *reigning* over them. The primary meaning of the kingdom of God, then, is God's kingship, reign, royalty, and sovereign power.

Realm is the secondary sense of the word kingdom. This is the "sphere" or "place" where God's rule operates. It is not a physical place, however, but a spiritual one. Anywhere people have submitted themselves to the rule of God is a part of the realm of God's kingdom. Although Scripture does not use this phrase, the realm of the King may be thought of as the "community of the king."

The Message of the Kingdom

What, then, is the message of the kingdom that Jesus announced and later his followers announced and that we are called to submit to?

1. Before you go any further, take 5 minutes and write out your own current understanding of what the message of the kingdom is. This is one of those questions intended to force us to clarify and formulate our thoughts, so please actually write out your thoughts.

2. One major key to living well under the rule of God is to be absolutely impressed with His Kingship. If we want to be a good spouse or friend, it is certainly appropriate to consider our actions. But we will be much more likely to act the way we should if we are fully aware of and focus on our spouse or our friend. *They* are the motivation and reason we want to act good. The following summary of the message of the kingdom is the basis and reason for all we do as subjects of the kingdom. So it is imperative that the message of the kingdom be understood with our minds and capture our hearts. Therefore, before you read the summary of the message that follows, spend some time in prayer that God will open your heart so that you can better perceive the message of his Kingship. The more clearly we grasp it in our hearts, the more complete will be our response to Him. So **stop now and pray for an open heart.**

There are different ways to present God's message. Here I am going to present it in the language of kingdom, based on the preaching of Jesus himself, the subsequent events of his death and resurrection, and the way the apostles proclaimed him as Christ and Lord. There are five key points.

First, Jesus demonstrated in his life and deeds that God's kingdom was real and powerful, and that He himself really was God's appointed king (today we might call him a regent, reigning on God's behalf). God accredited Jesus by enabling him to do miracles, wonders, and signs (Acts 2:22). He anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power so that Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil (Acts 10:38). Indeed, one of his purposes in coming was to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Through his deeds, Jesus demonstrated the truth and reality of the kingdom of God and made it abundantly clear that his power was greater than the rival king—Satan (Matthew 12:22-29). Jesus did more than enough to demonstrate that he really was God's appointed king.

Second, most of the people of his day did not recognize him (Acts 13:27). Even though they were looking for the Messiah (king), Jesus was not the kind of king they were wanting and expecting. They were more concerned about the position of their nation than the truth of God's kingdom, so they read their own desires into the Scriptures and came to many wrong conclusions. In addition, Jesus' powerful teachings exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and threatened them. So they rejected him and turned him over to the Roman authorities on a false charge of treason (see John 19:12). Even though the Roman governor saw no guilt in him, he gave in to their suggestion that Caesar wouldn't be pleased to have a rival king, and so he turned Jesus over to be executed by capital punishment. A sign above his head read, "King of the Jews," but crucifixion was such a

horrific and humiliating way to die that it would have been very difficult for people to recognize him as a king on that day. Only later did it become clear that this turn of events was a part of God's set purpose and plan. In fact, though, Jesus willingly sacrificed himself for his people, something good kings do.

Third, God raised Jesus from the dead! This remarkable act reversed the shame of the cross and vindicated Jesus. It set God's seal of approval on him. In the first public proclamation of the message by the apostles, Peter said that the resurrection of Jesus showed that God had made him both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). Both the Greek word Christ and the Hebrew word Messiah mean "anointed one" and refer to the ancient practice of pouring olive oil on the head of one who was becoming a king (1 Samuel 10:1; 15:17). Jesus' resurrection vindicates him from the shame of crucifixion and shows that he really is King. The apostles underscored this point by repeatedly stating that "you (or they) killed him" but "God raised him from the dead" (Acts 2:23-24; 3:15; 4:10; 10:39-40; 13:28-30). Paul likewise underscored the supreme authority of Jesus, using a slightly different title, when he said Jesus was declared with power to be the Son of God through his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4). So, the apostles continued to proclaim the kingdom of God, as Jesus had. Only now, having also seen his death and resurrection, they often focused their proclamation more specifically on the truth that *Jesus is the King*. In fact, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 2:42).

Fourth, the message of the kingdom is tremendously good news, both as it was announced in a preliminary way by Jesus and in its fuller form by the early church. The reality of the kingdom means we now have an awesome leader! And like any good king, Jesus faced our enemy for us, the Tyrant who was deceiving, capturing and destroying us. He dethroned him and limited his power so we could be set free. What's more, Jesus is a merciful King, one who will forgive us for ignoring him, consorting with the enemy and trying to rule ourselves instead of submitting to his rule. It is in Christ the Lord and King that we have salvation (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 4:12; 13:38-39; 15:11; Romans 10:9-10, 13; Colossians 1:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:9; Titus 2:11). Our King also rules us well by giving reliable wisdom, guidance and commandments that show us how to live and be at peace with others. He has also provided us his personal presence and power by means of the Holy Spirit, to enable us to follow his instructions and way of life. He has placed us in the community of the king, the church, where we find help and support to obey and serve him. What's more, absolutely *anyone* is invited to be a part of his kingdom, as long as they are willing to submit to the king (Matthew 21:23). The announcement of the reality of the reign of God is absolutely tremendous news!

Fifth, this remarkable message about the true King of the universe calls for a total response. The gist of the response is to submit to him as king and allow ourselves to be ruled by him. More specifically, we must humble ourselves and give up any claim to having status on our own (Matthew 5:3; 18:1-5; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17). We must repent of our specific sins, as well as the general sins of neglecting the King and trying to live independently instead of submitting to his rule. The most common response to the news of God's kingship by Jesus in the Gospels and the apostles in Acts is a stark, unadorned call to repent (Matthew 4:17; 11:20-21; 21:28-32; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 5:32; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20). We must also trust our king completely (Mark 1:14-15). We won't submit to his rule unless we truly believe he is the rightful king. But if we do, we will also embrace and confess him as such, variously calling him King, Christ, Messiah, Lord, Son of God or Prince. And no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are also born of water and Spirit (John 3:5).

This is a total, all-encompassing response. It includes embracing Jesus as Lord and King, giving him our absolute loyalty, and seeking his kingdom first of all. There can be no rivals, including the perennial allure of money (Matt 6:24; 19:23-24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:24-25). Yet it is well worth giving Jesus our full devotion, in light of the tremendous value of being ruled by God, which is greater than a singular pearl or vast treasure trove buried in a field. Indeed, those who truly hear the message of the kingdom and see its value will gladly forfeit everything for it and still feel like they are receiving far more than they are giving up (Matthew 13:44-46).

3. Pause for a few moments and consider what effect the message of the kingdom is having on you. What are you thinking right now? What are you feeling? What stood out to you? What do you want to do?

Life in the Kingdom

When we hear the announcement of God's kingship and respond to it in the ways described above, we come under his rule. We become a part of his kingdom. We put our hand to the plow and now must not look back (Luke 9:62). For the rest of our lives we will learn to live faithfully as his subjects. Recognizing how great and good our King is, we gladly follow Him.

The essence of living life in the kingdom now is being loyal to Jesus as our only Ruler and Master, and obeying him and his commands. We strive to enter the narrow door (Luke 13:22-30) by continually asking what it means to be submissive to our King in any and every situation. We also learn and follow his instructions about specific matters of our lifestyle.

4. What are some general or specific ways are you aware of in which you need to be more submissive to your King?

Before we get into more specifics of life in the kingdom, I want to emphasize that such a life is possible only by the Spirit God gives. After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended on him (Luke 3:21-22). Because of the Spirit, he was able to preach good news, give recovery of sight to the blind and grant freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). He cast out demons by the power of God, a clear sign that the kingdom of God had come upon them (Matthew 12:28). The Spirit operates and is received by us, too, when we are baptized (Acts 2:38-39; 19:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:4-6), and the new life we receive from Him makes it possible for us to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). The Spirit gives us the power (Acts 1:8; 4:31) and even the words to testify about our Lord, especially in threatening situations (Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12; Acts 4:8; 13:9). The Spirit also convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). Even the Spirit himself testifies about Jesus, although human testimony is

still needed (John 15:26-27). Those who live according to the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God but those who allow the Spirit to produce his fruit in them will reap eternal life (Galatians 5:19-25; 6:7-8). The Spirit's work is substantial. One might summarize that the kingdom of God consists of righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). Without him, we will not be able to follow the specific aspects of life in the kingdom.

5. What is your understanding of how the Holy Spirit helps us live lives worthy of God's Kingdom? What questions do you have about living by the Spirit?

A first, special aspect of life in the kingdom is that we are joined together with our fellow servants in the community of the King, which, after Pentecost, is commonly called the church. Though some of us may have had to leave behind our physical families for the kingdom, we received one hundred times as much in brothers and sisters in return (Mark 10:28-31). In our natural selves, we may tend to argue with one another, but our King helps us recognize that everyone in God's family is a servant of the Lord, and so we learn to show great humility toward one another instead (Mark 9:30-37). We know that a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, so we preserve our unity through humility and remembering none of us has any status over the others. We recognize how enormous was the debt that God forgave us so we don't dare hold trifling grudges toward our fellow servants (Matthew 18:21-35). We also know that the kingdom doesn't consist of talk but power, so we allow his power to actually change our lives (1 Corinthians 4:20). Nor do we get distracted with disputing the issues of the day, like eating and drinking were in the first century, but instead we focus on righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

A second important aspect of life in the kingdom is worshipping the King (Acts 13:2). Like the Magi, we seek the King so that we can worship him and offer him gifts (Matthew 2:2, 11). With the shepherds, we recognize that Jesus is Savior, Messiah, and Lord, and so we praise God with joy (Luke 2:8-14; see also 1 Timothy 6:15-16 for a great statement of praise to our King). Shouts of praise and joy are appropriate when a new King is coronated (Psalm 47; contact me if you want to hear a song I wrote on this Psalm). In those moments when we see his power and identity clearly, like the twelve did when he walked on the water and calmed the storm, we worship him and acknowledge his true identity (Matthew 13:32-33). Recognizing that he has ascended to his rightful place with God in heaven, we worship him with joy and praise (Luke 24:52-53). Because we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, we thank God and worship him with reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28-29). We realize, however, that our worship cannot be empty words but must come from our hearts and bear fruit in our lives (Matthew 15:8-9; John 4:20-24; Romans 12:1; Hebrews 10:22).

Third, life in the kingdom also entails actually serving Christ as King. We've already noted that one of our identities is "workers." We are also frequently called "servants." The notion of being a bench warmer, critic, consumer, or complainer is an enormous violation of the will of the King. Our Lord did not come to be served but to serve and give his life for many, so we follow his example. Day by day, like workers going out into a field or vineyard, we make ourselves available to him as servants. We are stewards of the gifts, abilities and opportunities that he has entrusted to us, and we are called to be faithful to him in these. In the weeks that follow, after our basic training is completed, we will go into detail about five specific aspects of the work of growing the kingdom of God.

Fourth, it is also clear that being a subject of the King will also entail suffering. One might not expect a King to suffer, and indeed Jesus' sufferings made it difficult for many Jews to accept that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 3:18; 17:3). Yet Jesus stated clearly in advance that suffering was to be his lot (Mark 8:31-32; 9:30-32; 10:32-34) and warned his followers that they should not expect better treatment than he received (Matthew 10:16-31). When he promised that those who leave family behind for his sake would receive additional family members in return, he clearly stated that they would receive persecution as well (Mark 10:30). Persecution will cause some to abandon the Lord (Matthew 13:20-21), so it is important for us to understand clearly that, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22; 2 Thessalonians 1:5).

Note: Basic training is challenging. If you start feeling discouraged or unworthy, you may want to watch this week's video again for perspective.

6. The last four paragraphs have described four key aspects of life in the kingdom: the community of the king (church), genuinely worshiping the King, being workers in the kingdom and enduring suffering. In which of these areas do you most need to grow as a subject of the King? What are some specific ways you could grow in that area?

These are some of the many ways we are called to live lives worthy of the One who calls us into his kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5). Yet it is painfully clear that we all fall short of pleasing the Lord in many ways. Remember, though, the King's mercy is one of the reasons the announcement of the kingdom is such great news! We know that he will forgive us and show us mercy when humbly return to him (Matthew 5:3; 18:1-5, 23-27). We are always dependent on the mercy of our King. We don't dare presume upon his mercy, however. We maintain a healthy balance between acknowledging our humanity and sin while also seeking to live more faithfully in submission to his lordship.

7. Write out your understanding of a healthy balance between your need to obey God and your need for mercy and grace from God.

God's reign is present and growing even now (Matthew 13:31-33), but it will reach its final consummation in the future (2 Peter 1:11). Life in the kingdom also includes watching, waiting, and being ready for the King's return when the kingdom will be fully realized (Matthew 24:36-51). Note well, though, that we watch by obeying and working, not by looking up into the sky. Yet we do look forward to our Lord's return, when he will raise the dead, and defeat all his enemies, return the kingdom to his Father and give us our eternal reward (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

Entering the Eternal Kingdom

Upon his return, our King will fulfill his judicial function, like a shepherd separating sheep from goats or a farmer separating weeds from wheat. Though we have already received a "not guilty" verdict in advance, due to his mercy, that verdict will need to be verified through final judgment, even for those in the household of God (1 Peter 4:17). The King has told us clearly what the basis for that judgment is. These teachings are challenging and perhaps even threatening, but the words of the King are true and just. It is imperative that carefully heed his words now so that we can indeed enter the eternal kingdom with him at the end of the age. These give us a fifth major focus for life in the kingdom.

Over and over the King emphasizes that to enter the eternal kingdom we must *actually live godly lives*. This includes taking drastic action to rid ourselves of anything that causes us to sin, in order to enter the kingdom (Mark 9:42-50). It's not enough to claim to know Christ or even perform a lot of religious deeds. It is only those who actually do the will of the Father who will enter the kingdom (Matthew 7:21-23). Likewise, our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees in order for us to enter the kingdom (Matthew 5:20). In context this means following not only the letter of the law of his commandments but also their full meaning and intent and doing this from our hearts. Peter writes in a similar vein, stating that we need to make every effort to confirm our calling by adding various Christian qualities to our lives, and that if we do this, we will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:3-11). We must also help people in all kinds of need, just like Jesus did, if we want to receive our inheritance, the kingdom prepared for us since the creation of the world (Matt 25:31-48). Obedience is necessary to enter the kingdom.

I recognize that the strong call to obedience can be hard to hear, because we know we often fall short. Please remember what was said above about our only being able to live lives worthy of God by the power of the Spirit. Also, we will continue to sin and fall short in ways, so we are always dependent on the mercy of the King.

Paul addresses our inability to measure up to all that God desires by his strong, repeated emphasis on God's mercy and grace (Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Titus 3:5). We cannot follow God's ways by our own power and we will always be dependent on his grace and mercy. This is such great and welcome news that subjects of the King sometimes focus on it to the neglect of many of the challenging teachings above. In fact, however, Paul himself also emphasized these things.

Notice that Paul, like Jesus, bluntly says that "wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Similarly, he states clearly that those who live according to the acts of the flesh "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:19-21). Again, "Of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure, or greedy person—such a person is an idolator—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5). All these statements appear in letters addressed to Christians and so apply to Christians, not merely those who have not been saved.

We must recognize that we are dependent on God's grace and mercy and that we cannot become like Him apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, and yet still take very seriously the need to be like Him and obey Him. We must ever strive to keep balance between the need for power, obedience, and mercy. Jesus told the parable of a King who showed mercy to a servant who owed him an enormous, unpayable debt. That mercy should have caused the servant to be merciful to others, but in this case it did not and the King was furious (Matthew 18:21-35). So with us, God's great mercy toward us should spur us on to live lives worthy of Him (Ephesians 2:8-10; 4:1; Colossians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:12).

8. Look back through the last five paragraphs and highlight the things that most convict you. Which of those things do you believe most needs your attention? Do you want to update your statement of balance between mercy and obedience (#7 on p. 17)?

Though we will not have been perfect, if we have authentically lived out the rule of God in our hearts and lives, we will be found worthy and enter our eternal dwelling. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father and will enjoy a great banquet with their Lord (Matthew 13:43; Luke 12:37).

After the judgment, when death has been destroyed and the Tyrant has been thrown into the lake of fire, Jesus will return the kingdom to his Father. Then Christ himself will submit himself to God, the Great King, and God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

Practical Application (1): Have an extended, heart to heart talk with God about your submission to his kingship. Discuss anything and everything, including any areas where you know you are not submitting. Obviously humility and confession are needed in these cases. Remember, too, that our King is merciful.

Practical Application (2): The matters that form the basis for whether we enter the eternal kingdom at the end of the age are *learned and developed during our lifetimes in the kingdom here and now*. So, after your time in prayer, and based on it, identify at least two things you can do to bolster and continue your kingdom basic training. This will not only prepare you to face the King at the end of the age but will also make you more spiritually fit for service in the kingdom now. Next, make sure you begin to put at least one of those two things into practice before our next meeting.