

Life in the Kingdom: The Heart of Man

The Goal of this Study

No matter how excellent a message might be, we all know how difficult it can be to take that teaching and apply it to everyday life. Our desire as a church is to focus on *one* big idea each week and take it *beyond* Sunday morning. This study is designed to get you thinking about Tom's message before you hear it and reflecting on it afterward. Some study tips:

- Go to the website each Saturday and view or download the study guide.
- Take 30 minutes to go through it.
 - Begin with prayer, asking God to clear your thoughts and give you understanding.
 - When you come upon a question, stop and take a few moments to think. Don't rush!
 - When you read the Scripture passage, write notes in the margin.
 - Note questions and insights, things you don't understand, etc.
- Get a notebook and keep your study guides in it. Bring it with you to church so that you can add thoughts from Tom's message.

This study format is a new experiment for us, so we covet your feedback. If you have any suggestions to make the study better, please let your leader know. Enjoy!

Welcome to The Kingdom!

There used to be a Florida Power and Light commercial that asked people, "What do you live for?" Think specifically about how you spend your time, where you flow your resources, what you find yourself thinking about most often. How would you answer that question? Write some thoughts below.

Over the next several weeks we'll be exploring the Kingdom of God. What is God doing in this world, and where do we fit? What's worth living for? Dying for? The answers to these profound questions have been pursued throughout the Ages, and they will be the subject of our study this semester. Let's begin with this week's message: **The Kingdom and the Heart of Man**

Study Notes

In the mid 16th century a major Christian movement was taking hold throughout the western world. It came to be known as the Protestant Reformation. During this time of explosive growth in the history of the Church, young pastors were sent out from new seminaries founded by men like John Calvin to plant churches with a fresh understanding of the ancient truths found in the Scriptures. While this should've been a joyous time of discovery, renewal and celebration, it was actually a season of great peril for those who would dare to take up this diploma and spread the message they had so diligently studied and embraced. Setting out to live for their faith, many would die for it as well.

Why were they willing to do this? What led them to this kind of devotion and self sacrifice? It was the vision of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, that John Calvin and his contemporaries cast before them.

So what *is* this Kingdom? What is this thing that is so valuable it's worth your time, money, career, sons, daughters, your very life? What is this thing that is more valuable than your safety, comfort, security, relationships, goals, plans, hopes, dreams, desires or reputation?

We're going to spend the next few months looking at these questions through what has come to be known as "The Kingdom Parables" of Jesus. We will discover that "The Kingdom of God" or "The Kingdom of Heaven" is Jesus' favorite expression for describing his mission.

What *is* this mission? In the Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus' taught his disciples to pray, he summarizes it:

"Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus' vision of the Kingdom is the total transformation of this sin-stained, sorrow-filled, filthy, broken world, into a perfect place, into a joy-filled place, into a place pure and unbroken. In this vision the world will be transformed into a place where God's will is done here even as it is in heaven. *It is the vision of heaven coming to us.* Biblical scholar Richard Pratt says, "Heaven is not the goal. It's the standard."

This is the vision of Jesus, the vision of Calvin, the vision that led so many people beyond their personal comfort, security, prosperity and fear. Jesus unfolds this vision through his Kingdom parables, story by story.

Study Questions

If you felt a call to ministry in those days of the Reformation, would you have enrolled at John Calvin's seminary and then headed out to plant churches? Why? Or why not?

Would you have enrolled your son or daughter at Calvin's seminary? Your husband or wife?

What are the things that we as believers in Jesus value more than the building of the Kingdom of God? What does that say about what we trust in and really believe to be true?

What does Jesus mean in the Lord's Prayer when he says, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?" Write that phrase in your own words.

How do you think life in the Kingdom of God should be different from this world we live in today?

This week's parable took place on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, where a great crowd had gathered to hear Jesus teach. It was about a sower spreading seed.

Matthew 13:1-8 ESV

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

²³As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

What is the single variable (or key ingredient) in this story that is the difference between the production of grain and the production of nothing?

Matthew 13:9-13 (ESV)

⁹ He who has ears, let him hear." ¹⁰Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²^(L) For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

What do you think that Jesus means when he says people can have eyes that see and yet still not see, or ears that hear and yet still not hear?

Have you ever experienced this? Explain.

Is it possible to live a long, healthy life, enjoying great leisure, safety, security and prosperity (i.e., to enjoy all of the markers of success), to die a wealthy man or woman at a ripe old age and have one's life count for nothing (produce nothing that endures)? Why? Or why not? And, what are the difference-makers?

Matthew 13:13-17 (ESV) (insert text here)

¹³This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.¹⁴Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.¹⁵For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'¹⁶But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.¹⁷For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

What does it mean to close one's eyes to Jesus and his mission, his Kingdom? Practically speaking, how might that be reflected in someone's life?

How does one's heart grow dull or hard? How can we, as sinful people, work to keep our hearts from growing dull?

Matthew 13:18-22 (ESV)

18"Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

What is the seed in this story?

What are the various things that cause the failure to produce grain or fruit in the story? What do those things look like when they show up in your life?

If the seed of the message of the kingdom always produces a crop to whatever degree (be it a hundredfold, sixtyfold, or thirtyfold), what does the utter lack of fruit mean for someone who professes to be a follower of Jesus?

Seeds sown in good soil grow and transform. Where do you see this growth/transformation in your life and where is it lacking? What kind of help could the group offer to you that you might be more fruitful for the Kingdom?

For next week, read Luke 15:1-10.

Luke 15:1-10 (New International Version)

Luke 15

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

¹Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins^[a] and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Questions for Reflection:

What's the most precious thing to you on this earth?

What would you do to find it if it were lost?

What point do you suppose the Pharisees were making about Jesus and his association with "sinners?"

What do you think Jesus was trying to say to them through these two parables?