

What Is It Like in God's Kingdom?

Have you ever prayed the Lord's Prayer? Have you thought about what you're asking for? When the disciples traveled with Jesus, they couldn't help noticing that he spent a lot of time in prayer. Luke says,

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1)

When they asked, Jesus taught the disciples what is known as the Lord's prayer. He said,

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13) (also Luke 11:1-4)

In this prayer, the coming of the kingdom is the very first thing that Jesus tells the disciples to ask for from God. When you've been praying this prayer, do you have any idea of what you've been asking for?

Consider this advice from chapter 6 of Matthew when Jesus is talking to a large crowd of people on a hillside. This comes in the middle of explaining to the people exactly what's important, where they should be putting their time and attention. Jesus said,

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and 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. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:31-34)

Jesus is very clear. All those things we spend so much time worrying about and working for are not as important as one quest, finding the kingdom of God.

The message of Jesus - proclaim the kingdom

Jesus himself was very clear about his own purpose. As he traveled around in his teaching ministry, he told folks that his purpose was to preach the kingdom of God. Luke records that

... [Jesus] said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." (Luke 4:43)

We hear from Matthew, Mark, and Luke that Jesus traveled through Galilee, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and healing all sorts of diseases (Matt 4:23; Matt 9:35; Luke 8:1; Luke 9:11).

From the very beginning of his ministry, right after his baptism in the Jordan by John, Jesus began by echoing John's words. Matthew says,

From that time Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew 4:17)

And Mark reports

“The time has come,” [Jesus] said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)

The verb that’s usually translated as “is at hand” or “has come near” is the Greek verb ἐγγίζω (**engizō**) which generally means “to approach.” Verbs in Greek usually include more information than we have available in English translations. The form of the verb Jesus used is ἤγγικεν (**ēngiken**), which is the perfect form of the past tense. In Greek this means an action that happened and was completed in the past, not something that started in the past but is still going on.

What did Jesus mean by using this verb? Does it mean that the kingdom of God is about to arrive, or that it has already arrived? Most modern translations use the “about to” choice. They don’t recognize that “has approached” is not an ongoing process of approaching, but a completed action of approaching that’s over and has resulted in being there.

The meaning that’s lost in the polite phrases “at hand” or “come near” is that the kingdom has finished the process of coming and is now right here, right now, present with the speaker and the listeners while he’s talking.

Seek the kingdom first

There’s one place in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus talks about priorities. He acknowledges the concerns his followers have about providing for basic needs, but then he says that one activity should be their highest priority. Jesus says:

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

Luke relates Jesus as saying:

But seek His kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. (Luke 12:31)

Let me say something about languages. You know that the New Testament was written down in Greek. This wasn’t the fancy classical Greek of Plato and Aristotle. This was the everyday Greek of the Roman Empire, koine Greek. It was the one language, the way English is today, that people from lots of cultures could use to communicate with each other. It wasn’t elegant, and sometimes words meant whatever you wanted them to mean at the time. As a result, when we want to understand what Jesus meant, we need to look at the range of meanings that words he used had at the time.

When we look at this passage in the original Greek, we can see how the individual words were used. Jesus said: But seek ζητέω (**zēteō**) first πρῶτος (**prōtos**) his kingdom βασιλεία (**basileia**) and his righteousness δικαιοσύνη (**dikaioσynē**). Here are some of the meanings that were current around the time Jesus was teaching. Those first two words specify the action that we are to take.

The first word, ζητέω (**zēteō**), tells us what we are supposed to do. Some of the meanings for that word in Greek are: pursue, work to obtain, strive for; seek for, wish for, want; try to obtain, try to find; demand, require, expect; request, ask for something.

The next word, πρῶτος (**prōtos**), tells us when and how we’re supposed to do it. This can mean: at first, for the first time, to begin with, before anything else; above all, especially, in the first place; “earlier” or “preceding”, former, before; most important; among the first, chief, principal, first in rank or quality.

Looking at this range of meanings of these first two words, Jesus says we are to seek God's kingdom first, and that it's the most important thing we should be doing, before we spend time on anything else.

What is the kingdom?

OK, so we get it that finding this kingdom is our highest priority. But what or where is this kingdom we're supposed to be seeking? As we look at the word for kingdom that Jesus used, we find that it also has a several different implications. **βασίλεια (basileia)** can mean: the power exercised by a king, royal rule, reign; the right or authority to rule; royal power and dignity; the dignity of the king as expressed in the territory he rules; the territory ruled by a king (roughly equivalent to 'domain').

The idea of a kingdom meaning just a particular patch of land is valid, but that meaning was more rarely used. The stronger meaning is the one that captures the power of the ruler over people's lives. In our independence-oriented age, we usually think of a kingdom as an old-fashioned dictatorship, not as living voluntarily under the direction of a good leader.

Righteousness means doing life God's way

Righteousness is also a concept that is not very popular these days. When we hear the word, we most likely think of self-righteousness, people who think their way of doing things is better than everybody else's. Righteousness has become the idea of obeying a set of arbitrary rules, rather than as living a life that pleases someone we admire and respect.

The word that Jesus uses for our desired behavior is **δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosynē)**. It was used to refer to: doing what is right, uprightness, justice; doing what God requires, obeying God's righteous demands; right conduct that accords with God's will and is pleasing to him; state of a person who is as he ought to be, the condition acceptable to God; be put right with, be in a right relationship with God.

This kind of righteousness is not a set of rules that we obey out of fear of punishment, but something we do to please God by living the kind of life that God likes.

Thus the kingdom is all the people, living and passed on, who choose to live under the authority of God. In the New Testament, the "kingdom of God" refers primarily to God's kingly rule, while "righteousness" is doing what pleases God. Most commentaries agree with this interpretation, but most translations use more formal and misleading language. This is too bad, because we're no longer formal people and we no longer have the respect for authority or experience of kings that existed in the first century.

An alternative translation for Matthew 6:33 that's closer to the actual meaning might be:

Make your primary desire a longing for the sovereign presence of God and to live in a relationship with God that guides everything you do.

How can we picture the kingdom?

How can we picture the kingdom? We might think of the kingdom as similar to a human organization like the Boy Scouts. The Scouts and the kingdom are similar in a number of ways:

- Membership is by choice, and you can join or leave at any time.
- Members hold a set of values in common.

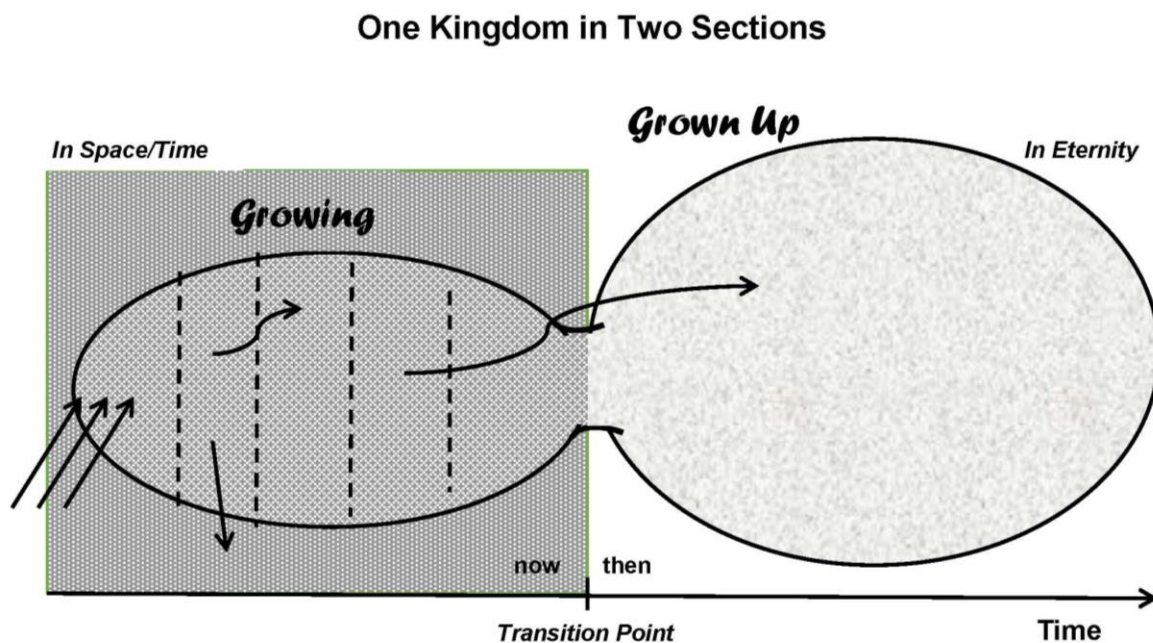
- There are two major sections of participants in each, scouts and leaders in scouting, and physically alive and passed on in the kingdom.
- There is a fixed division between the two sections, age 18 for the Scouts and physical death for the kingdom. Once you pass that point, you can't get back to the earlier section.
- The steps within the first sections move from one stage to another, ranks for scouts (cub to eagle) and levels of spiritual development for the kingdom.
- When the time comes to move from one sections to the next, your progress in the first group ends. You move to the second section as you are when the time comes.
- One does not need to have been an eagle scout to become a scoutmaster, and you come into the eternal kingdom with whatever your state of spiritual development is at the time of transition.
- Everyone who asks sincerely is accepted.
- Everyone is encouraged to consider joining.

In this analogy, the one significant difference between the kingdom and a human organization is that the Holy Spirit is active in the kingdom, uniting all the members with each other.

One kingdom in two sections

So in the kingdom of God, we have one reality in two sections, one in present time and one in eternity. Now is in this current life, and then is after we have finished this life.

This diagram shows the way those in the kingdom here in this life are joined with those in the kingdom in eternity. Many people are encouraged to come into the current part of the kingdom. Those in the kingdom have the opportunity to grow and move through spiritual development, step by step to grow to be more like Jesus. Some may choose to disengage and move out of the kingdom altogether.



Anyone can come into the kingdom at any time, and we all start as newcomers. As we grow in understanding and become more like Jesus, we become stronger as citizens of the kingdom here. At any point in life, we can choose to leave the kingdom from whatever stage we have achieved so far. If we stay in the kingdom here until we leave this life, we pass into the eternal kingdom, no matter how much or little we have grown here. At the time of transition, all that remains of our original human sin is washed away.

All those in the kingdom in present time have the opportunity to move to the eternal side when the transition point comes for them. It doesn't matter whether one is a beginner to the kingdom, or a long-time resident—all who are in the kingdom here are part of the eternal kingdom when the transition comes.

Once when I was in seminary, I was very concerned about a lady who had died. She was a Christian, but not yet a very nice person. My fellow student explained that all who belong to Jesus come into eternal life, but some bring more complete and mature spirits than others, depending on how much they have grown during their lifetime here.

Obstacles to moving into the kingdom

Of course there are obstacles that get in our way when we want to move into the kingdom. Jesus admitted that it could be very hard for some of us.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."
(Matthew 19:23–26)

Why were the disciples shocked that the rich would have a problem getting into God's kingdom? In those days most folks assumed that riches were a sign of God's special favor for a person. If even those who appeared to have God's blessings would have trouble, who else could expect to get in?

The real problem is the acceptance of God's rule in our lives. It can be hard for someone who has many possessions and the social status that comes with wealth, to have time or attention for much else. Where Jesus says, "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" a more accurate translation would be "it will be hard for a rich man to submit himself to God's rule."

Not only wealth, but all of our other idols need to get out of the way as well. Whether it's fame and popularity, awards and achievements, control and power, or even good looks and admiration, all of the things that matter more to us than God need to be left behind. Jesus is very clear. He says:

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.
(Matthew 6:24) (also Luke 16:13)

Some of the most difficult teachings of Jesus relate to how important belonging to him must be to us. We must give up, reject, and turn away from anything which has a stronger hold on our hearts than he does. He says,

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:37–39) (also Luke 14:26-27)

Living by the teachings of Jesus, living under the reign of God, must be the most important and influential thing in our lives, even coming before the other good things that we care about.

God leaves us free to choose

The kingdom is available to all who ask for it, sincerely from the heart. Matthew and Luke both report that Jesus said,

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8) (also Luke 11:9-10)

Since the kingdom is available to all who want it, why are the benefits of the kingdom not made more obvious? Why doesn't Jesus explain, in the kind of words an advertiser would use, how to get in? The disciples actually asked Jesus this question:

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, " 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'" (Mark 4:10-12) (also Matthew 13:10-17)

In this explanation, Jesus is quoting the prophecy of Isaiah, who was commanded to speak to his own rebellious and disobedient people. God told Isaiah,

Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. (Isaiah 6:9-10)

The hearts of the people were calloused and closed, focused on their own interests. They would not get the easy way out of the consequences of their actions.

Why not make it easy for us? As people with the strong drives for self-fulfillment, our own hearts are also largely closed. Some people of any age want to use the power of the kingdom for their own selfish ends. Jesus said,

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. (Luke 16:16)

The kingdom must be entered sincerely, from the deep desire of our hearts, desiring it more than anything else.

Jesus echoes the message God gave through the prophet Jeremiah:

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13)

However, this is a commitment that we must make voluntarily on our own. As author Dallas Willard expresses it,

God does not crash your party. He waits for you to wake up. If I am absorbed in my own affairs, if I am too impressed with my own religion, too intent on bringing my truth

*as I understand it to the world, I will not seek him, and I will not seek him appropriately. I will do it halfheartedly. The promise is never halfhearted seeking.*¹

God waits for us to notice what Jesus has offered, to wake up and care, before we can be part of the kingdom.

Where do we want to go?

Where do we want to go? The choice is ours, now and always.

The kingdom of God is not a location, but rather a way of living that acknowledges the authority of God over our lives. Living in the kingdom is living God's way with love for all life, no longer driven by competition and survival of the fittest.

For us as human beings, our individual lives are a process of soul-building, developing our souls and spirits by loving actions and interactions with others. We each get to choose whether we want to live under God's direction (authority and leadership) or not. People who choose to be part of God's kingdom in their lifetimes continue to be active and participating in God's eternal realm when this life is over.

Transformation into God's kind of person is not a one-time event, sudden and complete. A person who makes the commitment to becoming God's kind of person begins a process of transformation, moving from a self-directed focus of heart to a God-infused way of thinking and acting. During this time, the one who is being transformed is already part of the kingdom in this world, and will continue to be part of the kingdom in eternity.

The kingdom is available to all of us, but the important question is: How much do we really want to be there? God wants us to come in and provides us invitations and motivations. The way is open, but we need to choose whether it's more important to us than the many other pleasures the world can provide. God provides the opportunity to come in, and God allows us to wake up and accept it.

¹ WILLARD, DALLAS. *LIVING IN CHRIST'S PRESENCE: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God*. [Place of publication not identified]: INTERVARSITY Press, 2017.