

## The Temptation; The Kingdom of God

Before we leave the topic of Jesus' temptation, let me mention one last thing. In the temptation, Jesus was showing Himself to be the true man, the victor over Satan, the one who is willing to go to the cross. He was also showing Himself to be the true Israelite. Matthew is interested (especially in chapter 4) in showing that Jesus passed the tests to which Israel fell or succumbed. We notice that Jesus answers Satan's temptations with "It is written..." If you want to become skilled at interpreting Scripture you need to form the habit of looking up Old Testament quotations. An Old Testament quotation in a New Testament text is extremely illuminating, especially when you look at the five or six verses around the verses that are directly quoted.

The first temptation was to turn the stones to bread and Jesus answers, "It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" That quotation comes from Deuteronomy 8:3. Deuteronomy is the second giving of the Law ("Deuteronomy" translates as "second Law"). As God gives the Law to Israel He recounts for them the sins of the wilderness generation. He is telling the people as they are about to enter Canaan, "Don't make the same mistakes that your fathers did. They all died in the wilderness. Don't do the same things." Verse 3 in its entirety says, "He humbled you, causing you to hunger, then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God."

What were the sins that Israel committed with regard to manna and food? For one thing, they hoarded it. For another, they grumbled. After a while they got sick of the manna God sent them and said, "We wish we could go back and have the fleshpots and the leeks and onions of Egypt." Then God said, "Here, have quail, until it's coming out of your nostrils." (see Numbers 11). They were thankless and greedy and so God said, "The Israelites failed the food test." God brought them out of Egypt by killing the Egyptians' first-born and sending nine other plagues, parted the Red Sea, and drowned the army of Pharaoh. Then they said, "We want food, give us some food." When they got the food they said, "We don't like this food." But Jesus learned that a relationship with God takes priority over the food that you eat, so He passed where Israel failed.

In the second temptation Jesus was tempted by Satan to jump off the temple (Matthew 3:7). He replies, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Don't test God. Don't demand that God perform. Jesus' answer comes from Deuteronomy 6:16. If we look at Deut. 6:13-15 we read that Israel is to fear the LORD, and that He is a jealous God. Verse 16 says, "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you did at Massah." That doesn't help us much unless we find out what Massah is. If you have a good cross-reference Bible, it will tell you that the account of Massah is in Exodus 17.

In Exodus 17, the Israelites have just crossed the Red Sea a couple of chapters earlier. They've just been given manna. Now it says the whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin traveling from the place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there for the people to drink. So they called to Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said, "Why are you calling me? Why do you put the Lord your God to the test?" What did Jesus say? "Don't test the Lord your God."

What exactly did the Israelites in the wilderness do that counted as testing God? First, they grumbled. Then they asked, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die with thirst?" After it is all over, Moses gives them the water, but at the end of the episode we read, in verse 7, "Moses called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they

tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” They’re saying, “Hey, we liked the plagues—frogs were neat, blood in the Nile was very impressive, and flies all over the land were great. Sure, we crossed the Red Sea, watched Pharaoh’s army drown, and ate manna and quail from heaven, but what have you done for us lately? Is God among us or not? If you don’t give us water now, Moses, then God is not with us.” They were demanding that God perform at their bidding. “Give us water!”

Jesus did not demand that God perform. That’s what He would have done if He had jumped off the temple. He would have been saying, “You better deliver Me now. I don’t want to wait for the resurrection; I don’t want to wait to see what may happen, how you provide for Me. I want to know now.” That was how He would have put God to the test. One way or the other you would know if you jumped off the temple. Maybe Satan was hoping Jesus would know negatively by hitting the ground, but He would know. The temptation was to demand that God give Him knowledge. Jesus said, “I’m not going to play that game. The Israelites did, but I’m not going to sin where they failed.”

In the temptations Jesus was shown to be a true man resisting temptation. He was also shown to be a true Israelite, faithful where Israel was unfaithful. In fact He is the one true Israelite. He is also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He did not take the bloodless path that the temptations offered. Finally, He is the one who is victorious over Satan, seeing through his plots, seeing through his gambits. In this way He was prepared to begin His ministry.

Some have asked if, when Jesus replied, “Don’t put the Lord your God to the test,” He could have meant, “Don’t test Me because I’m your God.” The answer to that intriguing question might be yes. The problem is we just don’t know. Remember that Satan is not omniscient, so he may not have really known with clarity exactly who Jesus was. He *may* have known then, and almost certainly knew by the end of the Gospel story. But there are little clues here and there that Satan was confused on some points. The very fact that he entered Judas who then acted against Jesus, to betray Him for crucifixion, implies that Satan wanted Jesus to be crucified even though Jesus’ crucifixion was Satan’s ultimate defeat. So let’s not give too much credit to Satan for being so clever. Nonetheless, I can’t be sure that Satan didn’t know or that Jesus wasn’t giving him a reply that implied His own deity. We’re just not told.

Another question we might ask is: “Is Satan’s temptation to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world a bunch of foolishness since Jesus owns them anyway? Or is Satan really the prince of this world, and did he have some authority to give it to Jesus?” We might say that Satan probably thought he could do it, and Satan would certainly like to think that he had that kind of authority. It is also true that Satan was just about at the end of his sway over this world because Jesus came pronouncing the kingdom of God, the reign of God. If God is reigning then somebody is losing their own reign. The Jews probably thought of Rome as the power that was soon to be ended. But Jesus was thinking of Satan’s power. Even if it’s true that Satan had some sway—he does have some sway and he did have some sway before Jesus came, when he kept the nations in darkness—he was just about to lose it. When Jesus said “No” to him, it was a further step in that direction. This brings us to the next subject, the role of the kingdom of God and the proclamation of the kingdom of God in the Gospels.

### **The Kingdom of God and Its Proclamation**

When we think about the beginning of Christ’s career, about His birth, temptations, and so forth, we also must think about His first proclamation: “The kingdom of God is at hand.” Imagine being a new preacher in a church or starting a new Bible study series; you want your first lesson to set the tone, to establish your themes or the things you care about. The kingdom was the first thing Jesus talked about and it was also central to His proclamation. He spoke about the kingdom on over 100 separate occasions

in the Gospels, and used the word even more times than that—about 125 times. It was His most common proclamation.

All four Gospels stress that He began by proclaiming the kingdom. Mark 1:14-15, “The time is come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” The first words from Jesus in Matthew 4 are, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Matthew makes it clear in 4:23 that He went about through Galilee teaching in synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing all the diseases. And then he says the same thing again in Chapter 9, after the first round of Jesus’ ministry, to make it clear how important this is. In Luke 4 Jesus is asked to heal all the people from one town, but He says, “No, I’m not going to do that because I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God. I didn’t come to heal everybody. I came to announce the kingdom.” So the kingdom is central to the ministry of Christ.

I need to clarify what I mean by “kingdom.” There are three ways in which the kingdom is described. One is simply, “the kingdom.” Another is, “the kingdom of God, the reign of God.” The third is, “The kingdom of heaven.” They all mean the same thing. “Kingdom of heaven” is a way of referring to God’s reign so as not to use the name of God, because the Jews found it offensive to use God’s name. But they all mean the same thing—there is no point in distinguishing them. The word means “the reign of God.” When we think of “kingdom” in America it can be confusing since we don’t have any kings or queens and never did. It sounds sort of like fairy tale land, something far away and a long time ago, something implausible. Throughout most of history, when the word “kingdom” was used, people would think of the territory—the fields, farms, rivers, and lakes—that a king ruled. They thought of something very concrete. But kingdom does not mean territory. “The kingdom” means the reign of God, the moral and spiritual reign of God.

Let me give you an illustration: In the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come,” is followed by, “Thy will be done.” For God’s kingdom to come is for His will to be done. The two clauses explain each other. God’s reign comes when people do His will. When Jesus says in the parables of the kingdom what the kingdom of God is like, He is saying that *this* is the way God reigns. He never says that it is a certain size or location. To preach the kingdom is to proclaim that God reigns. That’s the kingdom. Jesus was proclaiming a new teaching using a new phrase. It was a new way of talking about spiritual realities. The phrase “kingdom of God” never appears in the Old Testament. Does that mean the idea isn’t in the Old Testament? No. The idea *is* in the Old Testament and that is one of the reasons why there was resistance to Saul’s kingship—it would obscure the fact that God is king over Israel. But the phrase “kingdom of God” is something new to Jesus’ day and is something that Jesus uniquely emphasized.

The term was open to misunderstanding, and it is open to misunderstanding to this day. It was widely misunderstood by Jesus’ first hearers. For example, when Jesus talked about reigning in His kingdom and so forth, His disciples quarreled about seats of honor. They thought of it in material terms. Or when Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem, Luke 19:11 says that the people thought the kingdom was going to appear at once. The clearest demonstration of misunderstanding is after the resurrection of Christ before He ascended. According to Acts 1:6, when the disciples met together they asked Jesus, “Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” In other words, “Are you going to kick out the Romans now?” And the answer was “No.” The reign of God is a spiritual reign over the entire world, not in a military or political or social sense, not directly. I will say more about this later so that we can understand the Christian life and the proclamation of Christ. Liberals have badly misunderstood the concept of the kingdom of God and it gives us an opportunity to look at the way in which liberal Christians or unorthodox Christians think about the ministry of Christ.

There are several misunderstandings. The first misunderstanding is sometimes called “the old liberal school,” or “the non-eschatological school.” Eschatology is study of last things, so the non-eschatological school says there is no eschaton. There is no end of all things. This school teaches that the reign of God, the kingdom of God, is the reign of God in the individual soul as the individual is morally transformed. They believe that the kingdom of God can be summarized in phrases like “the fatherhood of God,” “the brotherhood of man,” or “the infinite value of the human soul.” Their favorite verse is Luke 17: 20-21, “The kingdom is not here or there. The kingdom is in your midst.” It’s right here among you, if you would just realize it. If you would just reform yourselves, then you would know. There is not going to be any cataclysm, no signs in the heavens, no melting of the earth, but one by one if we morally reform, that’s the reign of God. No eschaton. In this view Jesus is essentially a wonderful moral teacher.

Many people have criticized this view, saying that it does not do justice to the teachings of Scripture. Over a hundred years ago there was another group of liberal thinkers (critical thinkers, not orthodox Christians) who objected to this view, and said that as they read the Bible Jesus was most definitely an eschatological figure. He was talking about the end, the judgment of the world, and the renewal of all things, and this cannot simply be removed from the Scriptures. But then they took a drastic step. Citing their favorite verse, Matthew 16:28, “Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom,” they say that Jesus believed that the kingdom of God was going to come with a powerful cataclysm and change in the world, very soon, but He was obviously wrong since it didn’t happen.

The technical term for this group is the “consistent eschatological school,” because they are consistent in saying Jesus is an eschatological figure. My term for them is “the irreverent school,” because they just thought Jesus was wrong. They thought that He expected world history to come to an end within a few years and that He simply erred. One man put it this way, still often quoted, “There is silence all around. The Baptist appears and cries, ‘Repent, for heaven’s kingdom is at hand.’ Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that he is the coming son of man, lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of humankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is his victory and his reign.”

This view of Jesus and the Gospels should certainly be described as unbelief. For this view, Jesus’ greatness lies in His moral courage and His commitment to a cause. He was willing to die for what He thought was right and in that way He is our Savior because He shows us that we should be willing to give our lives for a great cause. There are a lot of people in this world who wouldn’t know those words, but whose conception of Jesus is very similar. They have great reverence for His fearlessness, for His devotion to a cause, but no belief in Him as divine God.

Some other people disagree and see that in the pages of Scripture Jesus’ testimony, if anything, shows that He believed that the kingdom of God had broken in. They cite Matthew 12:28, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” They interpret this as, “The kingdom of God is already a present reality.” I sometimes call them the “old buddy school.” Their view is, “It doesn’t get any better than this. God’s reign is here and although it may not be that great, it’s about as good as it’s going to get.”

The right view is that the kingdom of God is here in some ways and in some ways it is not here. We can imagine this as a line on a chart of world history. The kingdom of God in the Old Testament would be

portrayed as a broken or dotted line. It was a reality, but it was only faintly present in the Old Testament era. Since the fall of mankind, you could hardly see the reign of God throughout the world. What you saw much more readily in that era was the kingdom of this world. But then the line is marked with a cross and suddenly it becomes much more visible. With the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection, the kingdom of God comes down. You could draw arrows coming down on the line at the cross. The arrows would show that the kingdom has come down with more power.

And then there is the New Testament era. Christians are in some ways in both kingdoms. The kingdom of God has arrived and yet we still live in this world. We are genuinely in this world, yet we are also in the kingdom of God because Christ is reigning in our lives and that reign became powerful in the life of Christ. At the return of Christ, the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God will join. This does not entail the eradication of the kingdom of the world, but rather that the two are joined so that God purifies and renews His creation. This world is not destroyed, as we see from the fact that we will have resurrection bodies, but it is joined with God's world so that the two become one again. We have the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan—our feet are in both worlds. We are in the world of God's reign and God's world, but we are also in this world. Look around you; there is no doubt that we're still in this world or this age. I believe this is the teaching of the New Testament, the teaching of Christ.

The kingdom is a present reality. There are a number of teachings that show very clearly that God's kingdom is here. Luke 11:20 is perhaps the clearest. As Jesus cast out demons He said, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you." That word "has come" is the Greek word, *pheno*, which means "arrived." The kingdom of God has arrived. It's the word you would use for "Look, the cousins have arrived. We've been waiting for them at the airport for two hours and they're finally here." It is the word you use when you say, "The plane has arrived. It's in." Jesus says, "If I cast out demons, then you know that My reign has arrived." We're on time, and Satan is on retreat.

He continues by saying that when a strong, fully armed man guards his own house, his possessions are safe. The strong man is Satan. But then someone stronger attacks and overpowers him. Christ is the one who attacks and overpowers him. He takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils. Satan is strong, but Jesus is now plundering his house. He has stripped him of his armor. He has tied him up and now He can do what He wants. The kingdom has arrived. Matthew 12:28 says something very similar: "If I cast out demons by the finger of God then you know the kingdom of God has come upon you."

There are many other ways of seeing that Jesus brings the kingdom and that the kingdom of God is here. For example, the first beatitude says, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs *is*—not *will be*—the kingdom of God." It is a present possession for them. When Jesus sends out His 12 disciples, they are supposed to proclaim the kingdom of heaven is near at hand. It's right here. It's not near in the sense of coming after a while, but it's here already. In Luke 19:9 we read, "Today salvation has come to this house." When salvation comes the reign of God comes. When Jesus performs miracles we know that He is undoing the power of sin, so His reign has come. He fulfills the Messianic prophecies and performs those miracles so that we know His kingdom is here. When the disciples come back from the mission of preaching in Judea and in Galilee, Jesus hears their good report about the demons responding and the proclamations of the Gospels and He says "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." The kingdom is here. He has given the Gospel to the poor. He has given His life as a ransom for many. Sinners are coming to repentance. The kingdom of God is in your midst. In the presence of Christ, the power of Christ is in your midst.

This is our experience now. The reign of God is here, but we're still a long way from entering into glory, as shown in the daily news. Even the most proud or the most optimistic of us would have to admit that on the basis the Bible itself, if experience were not enough to prove it. In the Lord's Prayer we pray "Thy kingdom come," so obviously the kingdom still has to come. We are in the kingdom but we also pray for the kingdom to come. The parables about the kingdom say that the kingdom of God comes like "a thief in the night," "like a seed," or even, "like a little seed." It starts like a little nothing, just a seed, and then it slowly grows while no one is watching. The kingdom is like leaven, just a tiny bit of leaven. Slowly it will transform the whole loaf. But meanwhile it's small. It does its work in a quiet and hidden way. There is a future to the kingdom that we still await. Think of all the references to the last day and to the future coming of Christ, the day when Satan will be finally defeated, when people come from east and west, when the weeds will be burnt and the righteous will shine like the sun. The kingdom of God is here, yet in some ways it is not here.

The whole ministry of Christ can be viewed as a ministry of the kingdom, of proclaiming the kingdom. We see this in the Sermon of the Mount, in all of Jesus' moral teachings, and His living morally under the reign of God. We also see the power of the kingdom of God in His miracles. Christ's missionary teaching is the expansion of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom is here and it's not here. That's the paradox. We're torn between these two truths. It is vital to understand that the kingdom is here and the kingdom is not here in order to understand our identity as Christians. It is our life. It is here and it's not here. God loves us. We're sons and daughters of God, we're remade in His image, we have all these privileges, our sins are forgiven, and we're unconditionally loved. And yet, our lives are full of tension and doubt and questions at times. We live between the times. Our citizenship is in heaven, Paul says, but it's also on earth. Blaise Pascal, a great Christian from a few centuries ago, called this the grandeur and the misery of man. It explains the ecstasy and the agony of being a Christian. It explains the dissonance that we feel as Christians when we examine our lives realistically. We feel something of the glory of Christ—we're being changed, we're forgiven, we're new people. Yet, if we're honest with ourselves, we still have petty deceits and petty selfishness. We use people in small ways and don't keep our commitments. Because the kingdom of God is here, we have an aspiration to more. Because it's here, we have enough courage to go beyond ourselves—to aim at something more. But because it's not here we are in genuine distress.

Not realizing the kingdom is here can make us feel weaker than we are in Christ. That mistake can prevent us from realizing the power that we have. Certainly, there are many defeatist Christians. We don't want to be defeatist but nor should we be triumphalistic, like the "name it and claim it" doctrine which teaches that if we just have enough faith, everything we ask for will happen. No, the reign of God is not yet perfectly manifested. Our attitude should be neither defeatist nor wildly overconfident because we live between the ages; we live in tension. We should possess real confidence, but not be overconfident.

Something else needs to be said about the kingdom. If the kingdom is here, but it's not fully here, then we're moving toward the day when it comes in full. That has a great deal to do with our ministry in this world and in this time. One of the mistakes the church can make is to get too narrow, thinking only about the church and spiritual things. We said earlier that the Jews thought a little bit too much about politics and economics and were hoping for the destruction of Rome. That was a mistake. But it's not *all* wrong to think about economic, social, and political transformation.

Not too long ago, I was asked to speak about prayer at an upcoming retreat. I replied that the people at the retreat would likely already know about prayer. Retreats are filled with dedicated people who

probably know everything they need to know about prayer. My concern was whether they *do* it or not, and I doubted that talking about it would make much difference. So I proposed to talk about something really different, something we don't know anything about, like Christians and food, or Christians and humor, or bodily life, or gender, or sports, something *really* different. They thought I was joking and asked me what I really wanted to speak about. They could not believe that I wanted to talk about something so "unspiritual" as food or humor or sports or gender. This is the type of narrowness that sometimes strikes us. Now, I know why they did not want a retreat on that sort of thing. There are not many Bible verses on these things and so it would be very speculative. How could they be sure I was telling the truth? The concern *is* reasonable, because the farther we get away from the clear teachings of the Bible, the farther we are from certainty. If I gave a theology of humor, or bodies or sports or food, I would likely say a lot of things that were false. But there is probably something wise about moving outside the areas of absolute certainty. If we know that the reign of God has begun to break into this world, then we should speak about the reign of God and economics and social change and bodily life and all the rest. Maybe we should not speak from the pulpit, with *full* authority on these things since we don't really know everything about them. But we should still say something.

So in this lecture we have walked through some aspects of the kingdom of God. We have seen that there is a lot of debate and uncertainty about it, and that it is not just a matter of theological debate but also a matter of the Christian life in many ways. The kingdom is here and yet it is not here, which explains much about our lives as Christians.