

The Key to the Kingdoms

Matthew

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Bible Text: Matthew 3:1-3
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On a personal point of information, that is one of my favorite songs in all of the world. It has a very unusual title, it's called "The Untitled Hymn." And for those of you that don't know the backstory, the young man that wrote that song some 20 years ago back in the days where we didn't download music but we actually went to a store and bought music, it was actually a tract that was not listed on the program. In other words, there were 10 songs that he recorded that he published, but you had to purposefully enter the number 11 to hear that song. Oftentimes it works out in our life that that which we don't think anybody will identify with may be the song that defines our entire career. What a wonderful wonderful reminder.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, tonight as we open your word, Lord, there are those in this room that are falling on you, there are those that are crying upon you and, Lord, there are those that are dancing. Lord, the common denominator for all of us is that you are at the center of it all so, Lord, as we open your word, would you allow us to be as Jeremiah prophesied and as the Apostle Paul in Romans declared, may we allow ourselves to simply be a piece of clay on the wheel of your life. God, shape us and mold us in advance. God, would you remove preconceived ideas and constructs and just allow us to be shaped in your image tonight. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This evening, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the gospel of Matthew 3. If you've not been with us the last few weeks or maybe you're new to our body of believers, we are very slowly, strategically and systematically walking through the book of Matthew with a very ambitious goal on Sunday evenings and that is to learn the entirety of scripture by walking through one single solitary book. The book of Matthew is not just the first book of the New Testament, one of the things that we've noticed is that time and time again that the book of Matthew is utilized by the Lord to take these Old Testament constructs, these prophecies, these concepts and tonight only share with us their proper interpretation but to act as a bridge from the Old Testament to the New, from the worship in the temple to our bodies being the temple, from Judaism to Christianity etc.

Tonight is one of those nights in Matthew 3, we're going to be introduced to a character that we're actually going to study more in length next time we gather but tonight is one of those nights, I mean this just as a personal point of privilege, tonight is one of those nights that if you can get this, then you can get a whole lot in scripture. In fact, in 2 Timothy 2:15 it says that you and I should rightly divide the word of God. One of the great travesties for all of us is we have a tendency of taking that verse and reversing it, rather than rightly dividing the word of God, we tend to take constructs in scripture that may look similar but a little bit different and we try to smash them into being the same construct when the Bible says to rightly divide. So tonight, I'm of the belief that if you can get this, it will change your biblical study forever.

That being said, Matthew 3, beginning in verse 1. It says,

1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. 3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

It's an introduction to one of the most unique characters in all of the Bible, a man by the name of John the Baptist. And next week when we gather, we will discuss his attire, we will discuss his dietary inclinations, we will discuss his prophetic ministry and the message that he spoke and the actions that he undertook. But tonight, though it seems almost like a bridge, I want to focus on this part in verse 2 where it says, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That phrase "kingdom of heaven" is only found in the gospel of Matthew. That's it. You're not going to find it in Mark, Luke or John. It's only there. When you go to the other gospels, you're going to see the phrase "the kingdom of God." Now there is one place and we're going to end on it tonight in Matthew 6:33 where in the gospel of Matthew "the kingdom of God" is utilized but if you'll just look at it from a broad stroke perspective, the gospel of Matthew talks about the kingdom of heaven and the other gospels use the phrase the kingdom of God. So what have we, humanity, traditionally done throughout time is we take those two phrases that oftentimes have parables regarding the same item or teachings that are similar and we do what humanity usually does, we smash them together and we force them to be the same thing. Tonight, hopefully I want to share with you that there is a very distinct purposeful difference that will help us understand what the Bible is saying from cover to cover, and most importantly within the gospel of Matthew.

Now I want to begin tonight by doing something I rarely, if ever, do, is utilize the "original language of scripture." Now I do study them. I am familiar with them. I know them. But usually I don't refer back to them because we typically communicate in an English world. However there's a reason for me doing this. I want you to notice something very important on the screen. If we're to rightly divide, I want you to see the word "God" and I want you to see the word "heaven." In English are they the same word? I'm not trying to be condescending, I'm just asking. In other words, the word "God" looks

different than the word "heaven," it's spelled different, and it uses a completely different set of vocabulary, correct? Okay, fine.

So why don't we go back into the Old Testament and let's look at those words in Hebrew. Is it possible that under any set of circumstances whatsoever we could look at these words and go, "Well, maybe they're so similar, they do have some commonalities, and maybe we're making too much of this"? Notice in the column of Hebrew. Do they look the same? No. Do they utilize the same letters? And allow me to go ahead and share with you they're pronounced completely different.

That was the Old Testament, what about the New Testament. It was originally penned in what we know as the language of Greek, Koine Greek, meaning the common everyday Greek. I want you to see the word for "God" and the word for "heaven." Do they look the same? No. They don't even have the same number of letters. You cannot look at these words in English, Hebrew and/or Greek and go, "I bet those are synonyms." No. "I bet they have the same etymology." No. In other words, it doesn't matter what language that you so desire to read scripture in, the word for "God" and the word for "heaven" are completely distinctively different words.

So why would you and I take these two phrases "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" and make them the exact same thing? That's the difference in vocabulary. Let's talk about their definition. Now I'm going to kind of take a step back here. You may think I'm kind of being a little bit treacherous here. I'm going to define these words for you not from a biblical perspective but just from a dictionary. I just went to a dictionary and decided to look up the words "God" and "heaven" and see what their definitions are. Here's what the dictionary says about "God": in Christianity, the Creator and Ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority, the Supreme Being. It's actually a pretty decent definition from the dictionary. So what does the dictionary say when you look up the word "heaven"? The dwelling place of the deity and blessed dead; the expanse of space over the earth. You notice the difference in definitions? They have nothing to do with each other. They may be in some way related to but none of us can look at those definitions and say, "These are the same things just using a 'different word.'" No.

The word for "God" and the word for "heaven" are two very distinctly different words. The definitions for "God" and for "heaven" are completely different. So let's talk about their description, "the kingdom of God" versus what we know as "the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 3, John the Baptist shows up. In the gospel of Matthew it says "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Now when you go to the gospel of Mark, you will see the phrase "the kingdom of God is at hand," and I'll deal with that in just a moment. So what is or how do we define this "kingdom of God"? Well, it is what we know as spiritual. John 4:24, Jesus has been talking to the woman who is at the well. Remember they got in this discourse and this debate about what is the proper means of worship, and she asked a very important question, though it was an evasive question, she said, "Where should we worship? Should we go down to Jerusalem? Should we stay up here in Bethel? Where is the proper place?" And in verse 24 of John 4 Jesus makes this incredibly profound statement, "God is a spirit and we must worship him in truth and in spirit." When we

speaking about "the kingdom of God" in scripture, it is a spiritual kingdom. One enters the kingdom of God by a new birth.

In John 3, a man by the name of Nicodemus is on the rooftop with Jesus questioning eternity and what's going to happen after this life ends. It's a very famous story in which Jesus replies to him that, "You must be born again." Remember what he says, he says, "How am I to enter into my mother's womb again?" What is he making it? Physical. What is Jesus saying? "No, no, no, the new birth is spiritual. It has nothing to do with a physical reentry, it is a spiritual reality." The kingdom of God is realized and confirmed by the presence of the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit within you.

So tonight if I were to ask you a very strategic question, "Are you a member of the kingdom of God," you can affirm that question by stating that you have asked Jesus Christ to save you, you are born again, and the Holy Spirit dwells within you. Therefore when we talk about the kingdom of God, it doesn't matter the language one speaks, it doesn't matter the nationality that one's passport resides in, it doesn't matter when in the scope of history one has lived because the kingdom of God is not a physical-ness, it is a spiritual reality that Christ is in you and you are in Christ. Why? Because God is spirit, we must worship him in spirit and in truth.

But what about this phrase "kingdom of heaven"? Last time I checked, heaven is physical. In fact, Jesus made the statement in John 14, he said, "If you believe in God believe also in me for I go to prepare a place for you and I will come again and there you will be with me," and it's that famous statement where he talks about the "mansions in heaven." Whom we know as God is described in scripture as being spiritual. I don't know about you but I'm really hoping that the descriptions in the Bible of heaven are not just metaphors. Think about the descriptions: mansions of residence, streets of gold, a throne of glory, thunders and lightnings of his majesty. All those descriptions are physical descriptions, that which you can see, that which you can hear, that which you can touch.

Now this may be strange and odd but allow me to extrapolate. When you ask me of my personal relationship with Jesus Christ, I can't see it. I can't necessarily hear it audibly, and I cannot touch the Holy Spirit that is within me but it's as real as anything. One day when I enter through the proverbial gates of heaven, that which I walk upon, that which I reside in, that which I observe is physical in nature. The kingdom of heaven is a physical, literal, earthly kingdom. Just as heaven is physical, so is this kingdom. Only found in Matthew's gospel 33 times in 28 chapters because it emphasizes – listen to this, this is what is critical – the literal, physical, earthly kingdom fully realized at what you and I know as the Second Coming.

So as we walk through the gospel of Matthew, as we see these stories in comparison to Mark and Luke and John, understand that when the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is being utilized, allow me to use our terminology, "kingdom of heaven" means Second Coming, "kingdom of God" means First Coming. "Kingdom of heaven," he opens up the heavens. "Kingdom of God," he opened up the tomb. Do you see the difference? And one of the

biggest problems that we have when we go to studying scripture is that we take these two phrases and we make them mean the same thing.

Jesus going to the cross, shedding his blood, and raising from the grave is a completely different experience than him splitting open the skies and coming down and winning at what we know as the battle of Armageddon. Him sitting upon the throne of your heart is a completely different idea than him sitting on a throne in Jerusalem for a thousand years. These are two completely different constructs so therefore when we speak and hear in Matthew 3 of the kingdom of heaven, and we'll walk through this in weeks and in months ahead, understand that that phrase is being utilized to describe the physical reign of Christ over the earth and the creative order, whereas "the kingdom of God" is used to describe our personal relationship with the Lord.

So let me share with you some similarities. There are four of them and these are critical to our understanding. Both "the kingdom of heaven" and "the kingdom of God" are said to be at hand in the gospels. We read not only here in Matthew 3 but also in Matthew 4:17, it says that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." In the gospel of Mark 1, the very first chapter, it says "the kingdom of God is at hand." Now this is not a new construct to humanity. In fact, if we were to go back to the book of Genesis, remember that after the tower of Babel the Lord brings Abram aside, he doesn't become Abraham until Isaac is born. He pulls Abram aside and you know the great commission that he gives him to go to a land that he knows not of. It's a famous story; we know it somewhat well. But I want you to think of what God promised him. He said, "I will give you land," physical, "and I will make your name great," non-physical. In other words, both opportunities for a physical and a non-physical blessing were at hand in his life. When Jesus Christ was dwelling in the flesh among humanity, I've got news for us, both of them were at hand. We know that the opportunity to be saved, to be forgiven, to be redeemed, was solidified with the empty tomb, but we must also realize and we will do so as we walk through the gospel of Matthew, that because of very strategic poor decision-making, what you and I know as the physical reign of Christ is still yet to be realized. But as Jesus multiplied the food, as Jesus walked among humanity, both of them, just like when Abram was sent to a land he knew not of, were technically at hand.

As you walk through the gospels, there are 32 parables that we have recorded from the mouth of Jesus. As we walk through the gospel of Matthew and particularly when we get to chapter 13, there are a whole lot of parables regarding the "kingdom of heaven." There are also parables regarding the "kingdom of God." This is what has caused, in my opinion, the most confusion is why do we have two parables using two different phrases regarding the same item. The three parables that Jesus speaks of are the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the leaven, and the parable of the sower. What's interesting about these three parables is that all three of them can be applied to both constructs. Just work with me for a moment.

The parable of the mustard seed in simplistic terminology is that which is observably the smallest of elements can grow to be the largest of aspects. Is that not the kingdom of God? In Acts 1 we've got 120 souls in an Upper Room. It's a very small group of people.

By the time you get to Acts 17, they've turned the whole world upside down. Much like that mustard seed, that which started so small, grew to an immense size. The kingdom of heaven, the physical reign of Christ is very similar. In fact, for technical aspects, I would say that in Matthew 25 when Jesus speaks of his return to earth and he speaks of those on his right hand, the everlasting kingdom, those on his left to the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels, we'll get to this later, those that enter that physical reign, they are very small in number. But I want you to think about just from an overly literal perspective a thousand years later without temptation from the enemy, with Jesus reigning on his throne, can you imagine technically how large the kingdom of heaven will grow. You see, that analogy, that metaphor actually works for both.

What about the parable of leaven? By the way, if you do not know, leaven in the Bible 99% of the time is not a good thing. It speaks about the leaven of the Pharisees and their doctrine, that much like when you place it in bread it will take that and it will grow within it, and typically in your Bible leaven is not a good thing. In the Old Testament book of Exodus, they were to remove all the leaven from their house before they celebrated the Passover, and yet we know that the kingdom of God, if sin is allowed to germinate in our lives what typically happens? It takes over, does it not? It festers. It metastasizes. It impacts our lives. It impacts other people's lives. And the same is for the "kingdom of heaven." Think about it. Jesus Christ physically returns one day according to scripture. He establishes his earthly reign and his rule. They are few in number that are there. A thousand years later they are great in number. Do you remember what the Bible says in Revelation 20? It says that Satan was loosed for a little season and many people decided to follow him. Even after a thousand years of having no actual temptation of the enemy himself, there is still that festering of sin.

Then there's the parable of the sower. It's one of the most famous of Jesus' parables where when the message is put forth, it can land on one of four items. It can be immediately taken away by the fowls of the air which Jesus interprets as Satan coming and removing them from impact and influence. It can land on rocky ground that springs up very quickly at first but when the heat shows up, it withers away. It can bear fruit and then become unfruitful. Or it can produce some 30, some 60, and some 100 fold. Is that not a picture of our spiritual relationship with the Lord? How many times before you got saved did the devil take the message away from you? "That's for somebody else." Or how many of you would be willing to testify not with the raising of hands, that there were maybe times in your life that you got zealous and excited for the things of the Lord but then a few months or a few years later you realized it wasn't even a real relationship, you just got emotional. How many of us would say we're that third seed? Oh, there was a time where we bore fruit but because of the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches we have withered away. Very few of us can say, yes, some 30, some 60, some 100 fold. The same can be said regarding the kingdom of heaven. Think about it. When Jesus in Matthew 25 returns in that majestic event, there are those who listened to the way of the enemy and found themselves on the wrong side not just of history but eternity. There are those who obviously sprang up for the excitement but at the end when he returns the enemy that is go the wrong way, etc. etc.

Why is this important? Because when we get to Matthew 13, there's going to be a parable regarding the kingdom of heaven that says the kingdom of heaven is like a field of great value that a man sold everything he had in his possession to acquire it, and then Jesus just moves on. So does that mean that if I sell everything I've got, I get to go to heaven one day? You know, there's a lot of people who've given away all their earthly goods who are as lost as lost can be. But you know that there's coming a time in the future, Jesus called it in Matthew 24 the Great Tribulation, there is coming a time period where there will be havoc on the earth and a creature that we often refer to as the Antichrist who will reign, the famous mark of the beast that is going everywhere, and guess what? In that day and time as they're expecting Jesus to physically return, oh yeah, you'd better sell everything you've got because the Bible says you can't acquire anything without taking the mark of the beast. Do you see the difference? You see, the problem is if we start walking through Matthew and apply the conversation with Nicodemus and our spiritual relationship with the Lord to these parables, regarding the kingdom of heaven, we're going to get mixed up, upside down, inside out real quick.

So in conclusion, what are the simple differences? Matthew 11 makes this incredible statement that the kingdom of heaven is taken by force. That seems odd until you see it through proper biblical lenses. Last time I checked, when Jesus Christ returns physically he does so by force, does he not? It's pretty forceful when you come out of the sky. It's pretty forceful when the blood runs to the bridle of the horses. It's pretty forceful when you're described as having a two-edged sword coming out of your mouth and your feet are as brass of judgment. If that's not force, I don't know what it is.

But the kingdom of God is sought with the heart. Matthew 6, remember this is the one place in Matthew where it doesn't talk about the kingdom of heaven, it's the famous Sermon the Mount and Jesus is revealing to humanity not just a guide for righteous living but more importantly a guide for understanding our sin condition, that even though we thought we were good in an area, maybe we weren't as good as we thought we were. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus Christ makes this statement, "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you." The interesting part about that verse is what are "these things"? Jesus was speaking about clothing, shelter, food, physical things. When you get to the book of 1 John, it speaks about why would we desire the things of a material temporal value over the things of a spiritual eternal value. Let me kind of bring this to a close tonight. Let me speak on behalf of myself because I can use myself as a good example.

About 40 years ago, I got on my knees and I asked Jesus Christ to save me. I became a resident of the kingdom of God. I've been a part of it for about four decades now, but I have not spent one single solitary moment as a part of the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because Jesus Christ is not seated on the throne. He has not come back with force. He has not acquired that which is rightfully his. There is a day that I will come with him. Remember the Bible says in Revelation 19 that all the armies of heaven come with him? This is important for you and I today because if we so seek out the "kingdom of heaven without the kingdom of God," we're going to get it all backwards and this, my friends, is the key to the kingdoms. Why did the Pharisees miss it every time they turned around?

They wanted the Romans abolished and they wanted themselves to be placed in authority. You know, we fall into the same trap. We have a 2,000 year history "of Christianity" of getting this wrong because I've got news for you: there are those right now that are in physical authority that I wish were not. There are those that have the opportunity to establish things in the material world that I wish did not. But right now the Lord has not called me to be a part of the kingdom of heaven because the kingdom of heaven does not exist apart from Jesus being on the throne. I'm a part of the kingdom of God. That's why in 1 Timothy 2 it says that we pray for those in leadership, not overthrow them. Do you see the difference? One of the great travesties of "Christian history" is when violence has been done in the name of Jesus, and if you research it, every time why did they do it? Because they were trying to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. You and I have been called to believe and to live and to propagate the kingdom of God until Jesus returns and establishes what you and I know as the kingdom of heaven.

Why is this so critical? Because as we walk through the gospel of Matthew, guess which phrase is going to happen time after time again? The kingdom of heaven. And there's going to be this propensity to try to read our personal relationship into that passage and at times there may be some similarities but that's not what it's speaking of. It's speaking of his coming reign which means that the gospel of Matthew – listen to me – is more about the Second Coming than it is the First. And anytime we get those mixed up, we become just like the Pharisees did standing before Pilate's front steps, we become just like many did hundreds of years ago who yielded a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other. The Bible challenges us to seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added. It challenges us to rightly divide the word of God.

Today, you and I are living in a world that, again, has walked through the door of chaos, unknown certainty and a very suspect future. It doesn't matter who is in charge, who is reigning, who has the seat of authority, the kingdom of God should be that identity that we should desire more than any other, for when we are saved, when we are born again, when we are his children, one day he will return, we shall return with him, and all that physical stuff will get ironed out because he will be the one that is seated on the throne. Let us not miss the kingdom of heaven because we have not entered the kingdom of God.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Tonight as we come to the conclusion of our service, even in a time such as this, in a place such as this, you may be one of those who said, "I've never been born again. I've never been saved." The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Let me encourage you in this moment, in this night, with biblical simplicity just cry out unto the Lord, "I'm a sinner in need of saving. Lord, I believe." Maybe tonight you're that person who has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ but never followed in believer's baptism, maybe you've followed in believer's baptism but you've never followed by saying, "I need to be a part of this incredible family of faith," whatever it is, we just want the opportunity to celebrate with you, to hear what God's doing, to pray with you and to pray for you. But whether our decision tonight ask of us to step out and step forward or simply to step out the back door, all of us are faced with an opportunity, a decision and a challenge of how we see

the world through the eyes we want to see it or through the proper lens by which God has given us.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this decision, thank you, thank you, O God, that if we will just kind of take a step back you have laid out the scriptures so majestically and wonderfully for us, God, help us, Lord, right now to just hear your voice, to hear your Holy Spirit that has spoken through your word speak into our lives whether that's a decision that would require stepping out and stepping forward or just a complete change of perspective on the way out. God, help us today to not leave the message of your word in this place but to take it with us wherever we go. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.