

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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UNTIL THE KINGDOM COMES

Matthew 4:12-23

Once upon a time I asked a group of elders (not here at Faith but at a church in Pennsylvania): “What do you think Jesus would say – what sermon would Jesus preach – if He came physically to our church next Sunday?” Not WWJD (What would Jesus do?) but WWJS (What would Jesus say?).

Those elders offered a variety of answers, most of which I’ve long ago forgotten. But I have never forgotten what one of them said. He said: “I don’t know exactly what Jesus would say, but I know what I would do. I would go out and tell everyone I could about this amazing teacher and His life-changing message!”

Wow! How about you?

That is the kind of effect Jesus had on people. People of all ages flocked to Jesus to be healed, to be refreshed, to be renewed, to receive hope and purpose for their lives. Jesus awakened them from their spiritual lethargy. He had compassion on them and met them at the point of their deepest need. He set them free from their bondage to sin, and filled their hearts with love and hope. He opened their eyes to His grace and truth, and gave them a new vision of life in the kingdom of God.

I want to tell you that Jesus still has that kind of effect on people today. Even today He is able – more than able – to redeem and refresh and energize all who will draw near to Him. One of the ways we can draw near to Him is the experience of worship in the company of His people. This experience of worship can inspire us and equip us and recharge us spiritually to go back into the world outside this place in the power of Christ to live as His kingdom people, for the sake of His name.

There are a lot of things Jesus might say to us if He were standing in this pulpit today – or next Sunday – including some things we would rather not hear, if we’re honest about it. But I can’t help but think that, whatever else He might say, Jesus would talk to us about the kingdom of God. About what it means to live under His kingship, His sovereign and gracious rule, in our lives. Someone suggested to me after the first service that what Jesus would say to us is: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is nearer.” And it is.

Read the Gospels – particularly Matthew, Mark and Luke – and you will see that Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than anything else. The ministry of Jesus begins with the announcement that “the kingdom of God is near” (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). More than a half-century ago, missionary to India E. Stanley Jones noted that the kingdom of God “was the center and circumference of all (Jesus) taught and did.” When He spoke to the people in parables, He would say: “This is what the kingdom of God is like...” When His adversaries, those who were threatened by His presence and ministry, sought to soil His reputation with

the people, Jesus said: “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28). And when Jesus was asked when the kingdom of God would come, He said: “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). By the power of His Spirit, it is among you. It is right here.

When Jesus came, He brought the kingdom of God with Him. It is right here, right now. It is in our midst. “The good news of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23) – the message of God’s gracious, kingly rule in the hearts and lives of His people – was the main focus of Jesus’ teaching and preaching. The kingdom of God arrived with the coming of King Jesus.

And yet, when we look at the world around us, with all its hatred and hostility, its warfare and violence, its poverty and prejudice, its greed and injustice, it sure doesn’t look like the kingdom of God has come. It doesn’t look like King Jesus is on the throne. It doesn’t often look like God’s side is winning.

That is the tension we find in the message of the New Testament. It says without reservation that the kingdom of God has arrived in the person and ministry of Jesus. But it also says clearly that the kingdom has not yet come in all its fullness, for God has not yet put all His enemies under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:25). The plan of God for the world He has made has not yet been fulfilled. But someday it will be.

The kingdom of God has both a present tense and a future tense. It is here among us right now. But it is not yet fully here. There is more, much more, to come. So the hope and vision of the followers of King Jesus are focused on the day, described in Revelation 11:15, when the trumpet will sound and the announcement will ring out in heaven: “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever.”

Amen, Lord! Let it be so.

This kingdom is unlike any other the world has ever seen. That is why, when He was on trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus said: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). It is not a place with territorial boundaries, like the U. S. or Mexico or France or Iraq or Iran. It is not based on political muscle or military might or coercion rooted in terrorism or fear. It is born of faith and love.

The kingdom of God is not a place so much as it is a condition, as Frederick Buechner says in his book *Wishful Thinking*. It is a condition of the heart. It is a relationship in which we willingly and gladly surrender to the sovereign and gracious rule of God in our lives. A relationship in which we put Jesus in His proper place in our lives – the place of Lord, the place of highest honor and authority. A relationship in which we give up the pretense of trying to win God’s favor and blessing by our goodness or achievements in life. Instead, it is a relationship in which we trust in the Lord Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves – to make us right with God. And then we spend every day of the rest of our lives saying thanks to Him and showing our thanks to Him by living under His gracious rule and doing His will.

If you want to know where the kingdom of God is, it is wherever God rules in the human heart. In your heart and mine. If you want to know where to find the kingdom of God, you can find it wherever God's name is being hallowed and His will is being done on earth the way it is in heaven. You can find it wherever men and women are giving themselves to do the Father's work in the world. You can find it wherever people are living their lives on the basis of kingdom values and goals. You can find it whenever and wherever we demonstrate in our lives and relationships here on earth what life is like in heaven itself.

But we know the kingdom has not fully come, because in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught His disciples to pray for the kingdom to come:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name,
Your kingdom come.

If the kingdom has fully come with the arrival of Jesus, with His incarnation and ministry here on earth, it would not be necessary to pray for the kingdom to come. That is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer. So the kingdom is here. It arrived with the coming of Jesus. But it is not yet fully here. So the question for us is:

Until the kingdom comes in its fullness,
What kind of people does God want us to be?
Until the kingdom comes,
What does God want us to do?

Let me suggest several answers from God's Word.

1. PEOPLE OF PRAYER

First, until the kingdom comes, we are to be people of prayer. We are to pray passionately, fervently, without ceasing, as Jesus taught us, for the kingdom of God to come in all its fullness.

What does the Bible say? Check out Colossians 4:2: "Devote yourselves to prayer." Or look up Romans 12:12: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

John Bunyan, a 17th century "pilgrim" who made much progress as a follower of Christ, offered this advice: "Pray often. For prayer is a shield for the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan."

That is good advice.

John Calvin, whose 500th birthday is this year, observed that "the principal work of the Spirit is faith..." and "the principal work of faith is prayer." Prayer is the principal work and the primary expression of faith.

There is never a time when it is not time to pray. And there is never a time when it is not time to pray for the kingdom of God to come. To pray that His kingdom may come is to pray not only that the kingdom may grow as people turn to Jesus in repentance and faith through the witness of the church, not only that the message and influence of the gospel will spread throughout the earth, resulting in the making of more and more disciples, but also that the kingdom will soon be consummated – brought to completion – when Jesus Himself returns in glory to take His place as Lord of all (See Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 147).

Let me give you just one example of the primacy and power of prayer: Some of you may recognize the name Austin Carty from the TV show “Survivor,” where he was a contestant in 2006. Carty is a Christian, and he wrote about a mission trip he subsequently took to Indonesia. Listen to what he said:

“The country is 99 percent Muslim, and (recently) *Time* magazine deemed the small nation ‘the crossroads of the Muslim faith.’ Therefore, we were unable to speak about Jesus in the Indonesian villages. But not being able to speak about Jesus didn’t mean He wasn’t there.

“On the final night of our stay, we met on the beach. A bonfire had been lit, and as it stood tall as a man, violently ripping with flames, it spoke of the refining process God had been doing on all our hearts that week. That night, along with one of the young boys from the school, I played guitar and led a chorus of praise songs that lasted for nearly an hour.

“And that’s when a remarkable thing happened: A kid fell to his knees to give his life to Christ. Then another followed. And then a third. Ultimately, seven children dedicated their lives to Jesus that night. I learned the next morning that the seven kids who (responded to Christ in faith) were, in fact, the seven very kids for whose salvation the (mission) staff had been praying for nearly a year.”

Until the kingdom comes, pray. And keep on praying. Pray for the kingly rule of the Lord Jesus in every heart, in every life, in every relationship, in every home, in every community, in every level of government, and in every nation. Pray for the day to come when every knee will willingly bow and every tongue will gladly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

2. PEOPLE WHO REPENT AND FOLLOW HIM

Second, until the kingdom comes, Jesus calls us to be people who repent of all known sin in our lives and follow Him wherever He leads. Sometimes I’m not sure we understand the seriousness of repentance because I don’t think we fully understand the seriousness of sin in our lives. It is so easy for us to gloss over our sin and embrace what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” “Cheap grace,” he said, “is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” And that is what a lot of people want – forgiveness without the necessity of real repentance. “Costly grace,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows Him.”

Until the kingdom comes, Jesus wants us to be people who turn from our sin and the kingdom of self in true repentance to follow Him. He wants us to let go of anything and everything that holds us back from following Him in faith. You may ask: Like what? Things like:

- An inappropriate relationship
- Playing around with pornography
- An addiction to work
- The worries of life
- The deceitfulness of wealth
- The desire for more things
- The idol of financial security
- A comfortable lifestyle
- The affirmation of others

All these things can take hold of our hearts and hold us back from following the Lord Jesus in trusting faith. But notice the response of Peter and Andrew and James and John when Jesus called them to leave their fishing nets behind and follow Him. What did they do? They left their nets. They left their boats. They left the comfort zone of their old lives. And they began the lifelong adventure of following Jesus.

Until the kingdom comes, Jesus calls us to repent of all known sin in our lives, to let go of everything that holds us back, and to follow Him in trusting faith.

Is there something holding you back?
Something in your life of which you need to repent?

Sometimes, in our stubbornness, what we need to repent of is the unwillingness to repent. Is that true in your life?

We cannot repent too soon, as Thomas Fuller said, because we do not know how soon it may be too late.

3. AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

Third, until the kingdom comes, Jesus calls us to be His ambassadors, people who have been set apart and commissioned to carry out a ministry of witness and reconciliation in the world for the sake of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says that God “reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting our sins against us. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are, therefore, Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us” (5:18-20).

You know what an ambassador is. Our government sends ambassadors to countries around the world, and receives ambassadors from those same nations with whom we have diplomatic relations. Ambassadors are representatives of the governments who appoint and authorize

them. They do not speak or act on their own authority, but on the authority of the government they represent.

The same is true of Christ's ambassadors. We belong not to ourselves but to Christ. We have been bought with a price – the price of Christ's blood – and we are not our own (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Wherever we go as followers of the Lord Jesus, we represent Him. Tomorrow morning, when you go to work or to school, to the gym or the market or wherever, you go as a representative of Jesus Christ. You and I have been given both the message and the ministry of reconciliation. And God desires to use you, to use me, to use each one of us, whatever our gifts and whatever our limitations, to be witnesses to the power of the gospel.

You have probably heard the famous quote attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." It reminds us that our actions – our lives – need to match up with our words. A point well taken. But it suggests, mistakenly, I think, that words are not always necessary or important in pointing sinners to the Christ of the gospel.

Dear friends, if you and I are going to be effective ambassadors for Christ, we must live lives that give credibility to our gospel witness – yes. But we must also use words to communicate the message of the gospel and point people to the Savior. With appreciation to Mark Galli of *Christianity Today* magazine, here is a better saying:

Preach the gospel at all times.
Use actions when necessary;
Use words always.

Until the kingdom comes, Jesus calls us to be His ambassadors, taking the message of the gospel and the ministry of reconciliation to people everywhere who need it.

4. PEOPLE OF LOVE

Very briefly, one more thing: Until the kingdom comes, we are to be people who love deeply. That is what the Bible says in 1 Peter 1:22: "Love one another deeply, from the heart."

Elsewhere, in Romans 13:8, it says: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another." Pay off all your debts – your house, your car, your credit cards. Do your best to get out of debt. Even if it seems like it will take the rest of your life. But this is a debt we can never completely repay. Jesus calls us to love one another (John 13:34) and to keep on loving one another, to love people into His kingdom and to minister to one another in love.

The church is sometimes compared to an army, marching off to war in Jesus' name, going off to battle the enemies of the gospel and Christian values in our culture. There is a place and a time for that. Done in the right spirit, it is a part of the church's calling.

But we must never forget that the church is a hospital for sinners, a hospital for the hurting, a place of refuge where those who are beaten down or discouraged or brokenhearted or

overwhelmed by life can experience the gift and healing power of unconditional love. Love that finds expression in both words and actions. Love that doesn't give up, just like God's love for us.

This is what God wants the church to be. It is what He wants this church to be. A place where Jesus is Lord. A place where everybody counts. A place where everybody experiences the power of His love.

CONCLUSION

Until the kingdom comes, what kind of people does God want us to be?

- He wants us to be people of prayer – praying for the coming of His kingdom in all its fullness.
- He wants us to repent of every sin and to follow Him in faith.
- He wants us to be His ambassadors in an unbelieving world.
- He wants us to be people energized and compelled by love.

Until the kingdom comes, may we live our lives as kingdom people under His kingly rule.

Mother Teresa once said: “By blood and origin, I am Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to Jesus.”

May it be true of our hearts, too. May we belong entirely to Jesus. And may His kingdom fully come. Amen.