

033: Great in the Kingdom

(based on Sermon #28 in the Life of Christ Series)

For many years of my life, whenever I read the phrases *kingdom of God* or *kingdom of heaven* in the Scriptures my mind automatically assumed the Bible was speaking of Heaven.

- Thus, I assumed these terms were references to salvation in the sense of regeneration.
- *Entering the kingdom*, in my old way of thinking, was the idea of getting saved and becoming a child of God so one can go to Heaven when they die.
- But I later came to realize that, in taking that position, I had a conflict in my thinking.
- For in numerous New Testament passages, *entering the kingdom* requires *doing* something.
- So how can these terms be describing initial salvation?
- Notice, for example, Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matt. 5:17-20

- 17 Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.
- 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.
- 19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
- 20 For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

When it comes to reward, there are really only two prospects: believers will either be *great* in the kingdom or *least* in the kingdom.

- Which verdict is pronounced upon your life at the Judgment Seat of Christ depends on how you live in this present life — whether obedient to the commands of Jesus given in the Sermon on the Mount, or disobedient.
- Here Jesus says that to enter the kingdom one must have righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.
- In Matt. 7:21 Jesus says those who enter the kingdom do the will of the Father.
- In Matt. 18:3 Jesus says that to enter the kingdom one must be converted (which means “to turn around”) and become as a little child.
- In Matt. 18:9 Jesus teaches that to enter life (which is equivalent to entering the kingdom), one must radically exterminate sin in the life.
- If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.
- That's quite radical! In Matt. 19:17 Jesus tells the rich young ruler that if he expects to enter life, he must obey the commandments.

Did you notice a pattern in all of these statements?

- In every case, man must DO something.
- Operating under my previous paradigm — the way I had always been taught — I must admit that I had a difficult time reconciling these passages with the Bible truth that salvation (i.e., regeneration) is by grace through faith alone, not of works.
- The Scriptures are clear on that point — Eph. 2:8-9, Titus 3:5.

- To receive eternal life, one must simply believe — John 3:16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-26.
- By interpreting the teachings of Jesus as salvation texts — and by assuming *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* refer to Heaven — one has to conclude (if consistent in interpretation) that Jesus is teaching a works-based salvation, or at least He did on occasion.
- Of course, we know that is not the case.
- Again, the Bible is clear that eternal life is received by believing, yet Matt. 5:20 and the other passages mentioned above, when interpreted according to my old grid, seem to imply that works are necessary for salvation.
- My former method of rationalizing the inconsistency in interpretation was to claim Jesus is teaching that perfection is required for entrance into Heaven.

Matt. 5:48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

- My faulty logic continued to reason that, since no one is perfect — *for all have sinned* — the only way we can enter the kingdom (which I assumed to be Heaven) is via the imputed righteousness of Christ, which I assumed is bestowed upon all who believe Him for eternal life.
- Traditional theology makes a great deal of assumptions to arrive at its conclusions!
- The problem with the above explanation is that the Sermon on the Mount is not speaking about Christ's righteousness.
- It is speaking about the believer's righteousness, that is, our every-day behavior.
- Jesus is *not* giving the gospel of grace by faith alone in the Sermon on the Mount.

- He is giving the gospel of the kingdom, which is about discipleship that leads to reward.

I now realize how terribly wrong I was in my former interpretation, and I am ashamed to think I put words in Jesus' mouth.

- I have since come to understand that, in this text, Jesus is not talking to unbelievers about matters of Heaven and Hell.
- He is talking to believers about matters of sanctification and reward. Matt. 5:48 is the goal.
- Incidentally, *perfection* in the Scriptures is not sinlessness.
- It is upright living that characterizes spiritually mature believers.
- Additionally, I now understand that the *kingdom of heaven* (literally translated *kingdom of the heavens*) is not Heaven but rather New Jerusalem, the heavenly ruling realm of the coming Messianic kingdom that will hover over Earth during the Millennium, as the city of reward for faithful saints.

Jesus is saying that unless your righteousness exceeds (i.e., surpasses) that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into (i.e., come to inherit) the kingdom of the heavens, New Jerusalem.

- In other words, you will not be rewarded and will, rather, be excluded from ruling together with Jesus.
- Incidentally, what does that say about the scribes and Pharisees?
- They will *not* inherit the kingdom of the heavens!
- If this is the correct interpretation and, in context, I believe it is, then we had all better get serious about life

and how we live it, for the scribes and Pharisees were quite meticulous about keeping the law.

- While we are not under the Mosaic law, as believers in Jesus Christ, we are under the law of Christ.
- Our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, if we would inherit Christ's kingdom of the heavens.
- But, as we shall see, this is not in any way suggesting we must be pharisaical. Quite the contrary!
- In this study, I intend to answer four questions that arise from the text:
 - 1. What does it mean to *enter into* the kingdom?
 - 2. What characterizes the *righteousness* of the Pharisees?
 - 3. What is greater than pharisaical righteousness?
 - 4. How can we possibly fulfill the righteous of the law?

1. What does it mean to *enter into* the kingdom?

- Those who *enter into* the kingdom are more righteous than the Pharisees.
- Does that imply that the *only* ones in the millennial kingdom will be those whose behavior surpasses that of the Pharisees?
- No, and this is one of the reasons we know Jesus is not referring to the imputed righteousness of Christ.
- He is referring to the righteous behavior of saints.
- Keep in mind that, according to v. 1, Jesus is speaking to His disciples.
- Notice what He says to them:
- Matt. 5:19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus distinguishes between two categories of believers that will be present in the millennial kingdom, and to use His exact words (in English), they are *least* and *great*.

- Both groups are clearly *in* the millennial kingdom. Neither group is in the grave.
- All believers will be resurrected to occupy the millennial age.
- As a child of God, you will be either *least* in the kingdom or you will be *great* in the kingdom.
- Either way, you will exist in one realm or the other of the millennial kingdom.
- Thus, to *enter into* the kingdom (v. 20), by having righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees is to be *great* in the kingdom (v. 19).

What, then, does Jesus mean by *entering into* the kingdom?

- He obviously means *inheriting the heavenly realm* of the kingdom — the kingdom of the heavens — privileged to co-rule with Jesus as His bride.
- All other saints will be *least* in the kingdom.
- That implies they will be mere subjects, not rulers, and with that status will come shame and profound regret, which will be evident in their weeping and gnashing of teeth (which is the oriental expression of profound regret).
- Furthermore, those who are *least* in the kingdom will be in the darkness outside New Jerusalem (which is intensely bright), while those who are *great* in the kingdom will be in the brightness within the ruling city.
- Therefore, we can conclude, based on this passage, that when we see the term *enter into the kingdom of heaven*, or the synonymous term, *enter into life*, in the Scriptures, we should interpret as *inheriting* the kingdom.

Again, this has nothing to do with salvation, but rather, with reward.

- However, this privilege is not for all believers, only those who qualify by living *now* with a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, so that their verdict at the Judgment Seat is, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”
- To make the meaning of the phrases *enter into the kingdom* and *enter into life* clear in the Scriptures, I am going to quote several verses below, substituting the term *inherit the kingdom* in place of these phrases.
- Notice what a difference in understanding it makes in interpreting the Scriptures.
- Matt. 5:20 Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means INHERIT the kingdom of heaven.
- Matt. 7:21 Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall INHERIT the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

Matt. 18:3 Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means INHERIT the kingdom of heaven.

- Mark 10:24-25 How hard it is for those who trust in riches to INHERIT the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to INHERIT the kingdom of God.
- Matt. 23:13 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither INHERIT yourselves, nor do you allow those who are INHERITING to go in.
- Mark 9:43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to INHERIT THE KINGDOM maimed, rather

than having two hands, to go to hell (Gehenna), into the fire that shall never be quenched—

Mark 9:47-50 If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to INHERIT the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell (Gehenna) fire—where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

- Acts 14:22 (referring to Paul and Barnabas who went from place to place) strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations INHERIT the kingdom of God.
- Matt. 19:17 Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to INHERIT THE KINGDOM, keep the commandments.

Interpreting in this manner eliminates troubling inconsistencies.

- Because I had previously interpreted all of these passages as soteriological — that is, referring to salvation, in the regeneration sense — I had to somehow explain away the works that are clearly found in these verses.
- Now I realize these verses have nothing to do with salvation.
- Rather, they are texts about sanctification and discipleship, qualifying to *inherit* the ruling realm of the Messianic kingdom.
- Thus, to answer our first question, to *enter into* the kingdom of the heavens is to *inherit* it as a reward.
- Of course, that requires following Jesus in obedience and discipleship now.
- Peter mentions the same truth in his second epistle:

2 Peter 1:3-11

- 3-4 His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.
- 5-7 But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.
- 8 For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- 9 For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.
- 10-11 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What is this abundant entrance into the kingdom of which Peter speaks?

- Is it salvation, going to Heaven when you die?
- Of course not!
- If it were, then salvation would be according to works.
- This abundant entrance is inheritance in the heavenly ruling realm of the kingdom.
- But according to Jesus, the qualification for abundant entrance is having righteousness that surpasses the

righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. That leads to a second question.

2. What characterizes the *righteousness* of the Pharisees?

- If *entering* the kingdom is equivalent to *inheriting* the kingdom and *greatness* in the kingdom, and if *not entering* the kingdom is equivalent to *disinheritance* and being *least* in the kingdom, then who will be *least* in the kingdom?
- Matt. 5:19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
- Lawbreakers — those believers who disobey God and minimize some of Christ's commands as unimportant ("no-big-deal") will be *least* in the kingdom.

In other words, they will be disinherited from a place of ruling with Jesus in the New Jerusalem.

- How ironic: breaking the *least* commands results in being *least* in the kingdom!
- According to v. 17, Jesus did not come to annul or abolish the law, He came to fulfill it. In fact, one jot or tittle will not pass from the law, until all is fulfilled (v. 18).
- A *jot* is the smallest of the Hebrew letters.
- A *tittle* is a small stroke that distinguishes one Hebrew letter from another similar one.
- We are not under the Mosaic law. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are under the *law of Christ*.
- Jesus now lives within us, enabling us to fulfill His commands.
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raises the bar to a higher standard. Mere *outward* obedience is not

acceptable to God. He desires *internal* obedience from the heart (considered *least* by the Pharisees).

The Pharisees will be *least* in the Messianic kingdom — meaning they will not inherit the kingdom of the heavens.

- They will dwell in the *earthly* realm of the kingdom, because they are guilty of breaking the *least* commandments and teaching others they could do so as well, without consequence.
- “To break” is to loose from obligation. James warned of breaking the law to any extent:
- James 2:10 For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.
- Thus Jesus warns His disciples that having a pharisaical mentality will result in being *least* in the kingdom — deemed unworthy of millennial inheritance, not entering into the kingdom of the heavens.

What is a pharisaical mentality, i.e., the “righteousness” of the Pharisees?

- If the prodigal son represents the tax collectors and harlots living out in left field, then the prodigal son’s elder brother represents the scribes and Pharisees living out in right field.
- The prodigal’s brother had an air of self-righteousness about him.
- The Pharisees were no different, and I believe many fundamental churches often breed pharisaical Christians.
- From Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisees in Matt. 23, we learn a great deal about the Pharisaical attitude:
- 1. Pharisaical believers observe the *letter* of the law, but ignore the *spirit* of the law (Matt. 23:23).
- Jesus will deal with this problem shortly in the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., murder/hatred ... adultery/lust, etc.).

- 2. Pharisaical believers obey *outwardly*, but not *inwardly* (Matt. 23:27-28).
- 3. Pharisaical believers love to be seen of men (and therein they have their reward — Matt. 23:5-7).
- 4. Pharisaical Christians add requirements to the law (e.g., traditions) that are not of God and they equate them with the Word of God (Mark 7:5-9, 13a).

In essence, Jesus is saying that one could keep the ten commandments perfectly and still not inherit the kingdom.

- Here’s the point: If you want to be great in the kingdom, your righteous lifestyle must surpass that of the Pharisees, and that means your way of living must be characterized by the principles Christ is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
- You must be obedient to the entire law of Christ.
- You must not merely obey the letter of Christ’s law, but the spirit of the law.
- You must obey not merely outwardly, but from the heart.
- You must not add anything to what God requires. You must teach others what Jesus teaches.
- Then, and only then, will you be great in the kingdom. That leads to a third question.

3. What is greater than Pharisaical righteousness?

- Matt. 5:48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.
- *Perfection* is better than pharisaical righteousness.
- As mentioned earlier, perfection is not sinlessness, it is upright living that characterizes spiritually mature believers.
- Our tendency is to snap back: “No one’s perfect!”
- But God called Job blameless (*perfect*) and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil.

- God also called Noah a just man and *perfect*. In Gen. 17, God called Abram to walk blamelessly (*perfect*) before Him.
- In every case, the word means “without blemish,” like the lambs that were offered undefiled and without spot to God.
- Eph. 4:13 says the goal of the church is that “we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a *perfect* man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

Paul is using the phrase “growing unto a *perfect* man” to describe the goal of sanctification.

- *Perfection*, according to Eph, 4:13, is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.
- Paul’s goal, as stated in Col. 1:28, is to present all believers *perfect* in Christ Jesus.
- Once again, in the context, he’s referring to the goal of sanctification.
- Later, in Col. 4:12, Paul’s prayer is that we might “stand *perfect* and complete in all the will of God.”
- In James 2:22, while admonishing the believers, James says that by works (i.e., righteous living), faith is made *perfect* (not sinless, but brought to the goal of spiritual maturity).

Jesus is calling us to *perfection*.

- The word does not merely mean “mature,” for it would not make sense for Him to command believers to “Be mature as your Father in Heaven is mature.”
- Of course, God is mature! He’s God!
- Jesus wants His children to be as upright as God is.

- That’s a tall order, but it’s the goal, made possible in large part by the indwelling presence of Jesus, who enables us, by His grace, to reach the goal.
- The Sermon on the Mount is the roadmap to perfection.
- Does your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees?
- That leads me to a final question.

4. How can we possibly fulfill the righteous of the law?

- 17 Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.
- Jesus came to fulfill the law.
- He lived it completely and perfectly.
- We can also, to the extent we let Him live His life through us.
- To that end, there’s something beautiful in this verse.
- Notice the word *fulfill*.
- In the Greek, it is the idea of rendering full and complete.
- It is carrying through to the end and accomplishing.
- Hold that thought and look at Romans 8:4:
- Rom. 8:4 that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The word *fulfill* here is the same Greek word as in Matt. 5:17.

- In Matthew, we learn that Jesus came to *fulfill* the law — to carry it through to the end.
- In Rom. 8 we learn that we have the same responsibility of carrying through the law to the end.
- How can we possibly do that?
- By choosing to walk in the Spirit rather than the flesh.
- Gal. 5:16 Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

- Does your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees?
- If so, you will be *great* in the kingdom.
- If not, you will be *least* in the kingdom.
- There is no excuse for falling short of the perfection that Jesus requires for greatness.
- For Perfection dwells within your spirit — His name is Jesus!
- I challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS!