

He headed back to where John was still preaching and baptizing and did more nothing. The Baptizer, however, told his followers that Jesus was “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). In other words, “Follow that one instead. Somehow He is the fulfillment of all that the temple system represents.” John probably didn’t even know what he was saying when he pushed his own followers to abandon him. Yet five of them ended up accompanying Jesus on the eighty-mile walk north to the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus had been raised and where He was still based.

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## 25

## The Kingdom

*Matthew 4:12–20:34, Mark 1:14–10:52,  
Luke 4:14–18:43, John 2:1–10:42*

**New Wine**

The Son of God yielded His divine power when He confined Himself to humanness. But at His baptism, Jesus received the power of God’s Spirit, just as the prophets before Him had done. And His total surrender to the Father made Him more open to the Spirit than any prophet; for the first time ever, a human walked in the full authority of the Holy Spirit. What God had intended for Adam, this second Adam lived.

His first public use of this power was to supply wine for a wedding feast. It was an entirely appropriate debut. God liked parties. He had told Isaiah that His Kingdom was going to be like one immense party with the best food and the finest wine. And weddings were His favorite, since they reminded Him of the union He would one day have with His Bride, the people He loved.

So Jesus selected six huge stone jars, slimy with the scum of ceremonial Jewish washing, and ordered them filled with water. To the wedding guests who drank the water-become-wine, the miracle probably meant little. But to the five men who had followed Jesus from the Jordan, this was a hint. The King who had

commanded the Jewish Law for a season and a purpose was about to change the stagnant water it had become into fresh wine for a royal feast. All that washing in dirty water had grown pointless. It was time for men and women to be washed in fire and drink the new wine of the Kingdom.

### The Kingdom at Hand

This was Jesus' message as He began to visit synagogues and preach in the streets: "Repent" – turn around, change your thinking, shake the dust out of your heads – "for the Kingdom of God is at hand." The King has arrived. Dump out your jars of scummy water and get ready for fresh wine.

To demonstrate His kingship and His Father's character, Jesus set about fulfilling Isaiah 61:1-2. Luke records Jesus' words:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.  
(Luke 4:18-19)

From sunup to sundown He healed the sick, cast demons out of people, and proclaimed that the day of liberation had come.

Of course, He meant the day of liberation from the Snake and from the madness that had gripped Adam's kin since the beginning. Freedom from people's insane efforts to feed their spirits with work or sex or possessions or power. Freedom from old bitterness and senseless grief. But the people persisted in not seeing past their noses. To them "the Kingdom of God has drawn near" could mean only that Daniel's sixty-nine weeks had drawn to a close, and that God was about to smash the last of the great world empires and erect on its ruins a Jewish kingdom that would endure forever. The Son of David would be a general leading a supernaturally equipped Jewish army to victory against Rome and an earthly golden age.

### Upside-Down Values

Consequently, Jesus' teaching about the values of Kingdom citizens made virtually no sense to anybody. *You think it's good to be rich and well fed and laughing and popular*, He said. *That's right, we sure do*, was the universal response. *Well, you're wrong. The really fortunate people from now on are the poor, hungry, weeping, and rejected.* What? He made Himself somewhat clearer by explaining that He was referring to those who knew their spiritual poverty, mourned over it, and hungered to have their intimacy with God restored. One should envy those people, for they were ripe to enter God's Kingdom.

Jesus maintained that this was often easier for people who didn't have a lot of physical comforts or even necessities to rely on. He certainly wasn't prejudiced against rich people, especially those who treated their wealth as a tool to serve God. But He had a special fondness for the vulnerable of all sorts, and He was constantly warning against the subtle temptation to worship money. None of this made sense to a nation committed to the iron-clad rule that wealth equals God's favor and poverty equals God's displeasure.

Then there was Jesus' teaching on forgiveness:

"If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. . . .

"Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back." (Luke 6:29-30,35)

The idea of not retaliating against injuries was so foreign to any sane reasoning that no one knew what to do with it. Why would someone just lie down and let people take advantage of him? Doesn't that just encourage unscrupulous people – most of all the Roman soldiers, who would intimidate the last dime out of a person if he let them? Certainly, the Sadducees preached cooperation with Rome and the Pharisees agreed under

protest, but to a Zealot, turning one's cheek to a Roman was mealy-mouthed blasphemy.

One could spiritualize Jesus' words to mean merely that one should have a generous and forgiving attitude, but the stark statements themselves went much further than that. Total nonretaliation. Absolute freedom from bitterness.

In fact, everything Jesus said went a lot further than most people were prepared to go. The commands from Mount Sinai forbade murder and adultery; Jesus said those included even hatred and lust (the inner attitudes behind the actions):

"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (5:48)

Here was a standard so laughably high that one could hardly do anything but throw up one's hands in defeat. It was tempting to ignore it, except that it veered dangerously close to the standard of total holiness laid down in the Law. But could the hundreds of the Pharisees' intricate rules really be a lazy compromise of God's real requirements? The mind reeled at the thought. And when His hearers were staggering, Jesus thoroughly confused them by accusing the Pharisees of putting intolerable burdens on the people. He said,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" (Matthew 11:28-29, emphasis added)

Somehow, Jesus claimed, committing oneself to those impossible Kingdom values and approaching them yoked to the King would actually be easier than laboring over the Pharisees' rules.

### The Inner Circle

But most of the crowd who mobbed Jesus in search of healings and miracles wanted nothing to do with such demands. Fairly soon He resorted to speaking to them only in parables—little stories with subtle or not-so-subtle points. They were easy to ignore but also hard to forget, and the unspoken punch line was always, "So what are you going to do about it?" For example, He said once, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matthew 13:44). In other words, *How much is God's Kingdom worth to you? What would you be willing to give up to gain it? How serious are you about seeking God?*

Meanwhile, Jesus focused His attention on that smaller group of people who really wanted to understand what He was saying. Every rabbi had disciples; Jesus was no different in that respect. He was unusual in that He persistently weeded them out with statements like, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58) and "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53). Anybody who would hang around for comments like these was seeing more in Jesus than just a miracle-worker or a potential military commander.

There were at least seventy of these fairly serious disciples. From among them, Jesus selected twelve to be His inner circle—His comrades, confidants, and crack trainees. He called them *apostoloi* (Greek) or *shaluchim*, (Aramaic, the language of Jewish Palestine). These words meant "sent ones," but in Jewish legalese it referred to a special representative, a proxy or ambassador. One could send a *shaliach*, or apostle, to collect religious taxes, deliver a certificate of divorce, or even stand in for the bridegroom in a betrothal. Jesus was the official *shaliach* from the Father, and He was grooming twelve men to carry on that task.

His selection gives one pause. He stayed up all night praying to discern which twelve were the right ones, and here is the group He chose: Simon Peter, a well-meaning if hotheaded fisherman; Peter persistently rushed in where angels feared to tread. Simon's brother, Andrew, one of those disciples of John the Baptizer. James and John, fishermen brothers who bore the

nickname "Sons of Thunder" because of their tempers. Simon the Zealot, a revolutionary with violent anti-Roman leanings. Matthew, a tax collector for Herod—the kind of person guys like Simon usually spat at when they met them in the street. Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, another James, Thaddaeus—we know almost nothing about these five; did they ever do anything? Then there was Judas Iscariot, the only man from Judea (the rest were backcountry types from Galilee). Being the sharpest with finances, Judas was in charge of the money, but he tended to dip into it for his own purposes.

There wasn't an educated man in the bunch, and all were rough diamonds at best. But these were the men Jesus took with Him everywhere He went. He and the Twelve were joined by some women who paid the bills out of gratitude for healings they had received from Jesus.

### Acting Like God

In a culture where even chaste women were considered instruments of the Devil sent to corrupt nice Jewish boys, having women in His entourage was a move guaranteed to raise eyebrows. Rabbis were taught to speak to women as little as possible (including their wives), but Jesus freely chatted with women both alone and in public. He even taught them as disciples (no decent rabbi would have dreamed of having female disciples).

In fact, if He had come to endear Himself to His people, He was going about it entirely the wrong way. He kept declaring God's pleasure with the faith of dirty Gentiles. He attended rowdy parties at the homes of the first-century equivalent of loan sharks and shady businessmen. He talked a lot about humility but was constantly coming out with outrageous statements.

First, He professed the right to interpret the Law with a total disregard for the traditions of the elders. He generally leaned toward the Pharisees' viewpoint rather than the Sadducees', but then He would say, "You have heard [from the rabbis] . . . but I say to you. . . ." He called Himself "Lord of the Sabbath" and said that gave Him the right to ignore the rules for that holy day. His followers did not fast, He said, because one should celebrate when He was present. He even claimed the right to forgive

sins, which only God could do, and backed up the claim with miracles.

One day He was at a Pharisee's home for dinner, and a street woman came in (homes were fairly public in that culture). She drenched Jesus' feet with her tears, then started kissing His feet and wiping them with her hair, and finally poured wildly expensive perfume over them. Jesus acted as though this were a perfectly acceptable way for a total stranger to treat Him in public. He had the gall to declare all her sins forgiven because of this shocking display. His host was speechless at a supposed great prophet acting like He thought He was God.

### Face-off

And He didn't stop there. The Pharisees were seething at Him for breaking the no-work rule by healing people on the Sabbath, and in general for implying that He was God's equal. They didn't like the familiar way He called God "My Father" instead of "the Father" or "our Father in Heaven." Everything about Him threatened their neat system and their cozy position at the pinnacle of Jewish society. So they started spreading a rumor that He was casting out demons by the power of the Chief Demon himself. Jesus coolly pointed out the absurdity of this idea; why would the Devil cast out the Devil?

The truth was quite the reverse. Time after time Jesus faced off against the Pharisees and other rabbis. He didn't mince words about their hypocrisy, pride, and greed: "Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it" (Luke 11:44). It incensed Him that they had reduced His Father's commands to a set of external rules that one could practice while entirely sidestepping any real passion for God or compassion for people.

Many of Jesus' parables were barbed arrows aimed at the Pharisees. When they complained that He treated the dregs of society like friends, He told a story about a father with two sons. The older son stayed home to serve his father obediently, while the younger left home with his inheritance, squandered it in wild living, lived hand to mouth for awhile, and finally crawled home, hoping for a job on his dad's farm. He was now willing to accept

the humiliation he had coming, but the father welcomed him home, restored him to the full privileges of a son, and threw a party. The older son was irate:

“Look! [he said.] All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when *this son of yours* who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because *this brother of yours* was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:29-32, emphasis added)

Jesus had come to welcome despairing younger brothers home to a Father who longed to throw His arms around them. It broke His heart to see the bitter elder brothers who were wasting their lives serving a Father they resented because they could not understand His love.

Jesus grieved that their spite had blinded them beyond repair. Although He was not given to name-calling, He had a title for them: “You brood of vipers!” (Matthew 12:34, 23:33). After long ages the Son of Eve had come, and the sons of the Snake were waiting. The Serpent had spawned not just among the pagan Romans who taxed Judea to support their decadence, nor the thieves and whores of the Jewish underclass, but among the religious leaders whose real gods were security, comfort, tradition, and respectability.

Jesus knew exactly who stood behind the malice in these men’s eyes. He told His apostles, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Luke 9:22).

The Twelve were stunned. Jesus was at the height of His popularity; they were riding a crest to Jerusalem with the anointed Son of David. It was only a matter of time before He directed His

power against Rome and the Kingdom began in earnest. But Jesus knew better. Luke writes, “When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say” (11:53-54).