

Sermon – God’s Will
Sunday January 8, 2012

Last Sunday, we started a sermon series called *Thy Kingdom Come: Living God’s Tomorrow Today*. This focus on the kingdom of God is in fact, going to be our focus as a church for the year. Which makes us ask the question, **What is the kingdom of God?**

It’s a term that many if not most people have at least heard of. We use the term in a variety of ways. We sing about the kingdom in worship songs. We get excited when someone prays to receive Christ and enters “the kingdom”. And have you noticed how we can make our statements seem more important and more spiritual. We just need to invoke the word “kingdom”, like when we say, “let’s do this for the kingdom” or “let’s have a kingdom attitude about this”. (Anyway, back to this really important *kingdom* sermon...)

But even as we use the term “kingdom”, have you noticed how it seems like different people have different ideas of what it means? Sometimes when we use it, it sounds like we’re talking about the church. Other times, it sounds like we’re describing Jesus coming back again.

But do we have a clear sense of what the kingdom of God actually is?

During the time of Jesus, the Jews living then actually had a strong hope and anticipation for God’s kingdom to come. I think we lose a bit of that in our modern culture because our times are so very different from the times they lived in. Not only do we live in a democracy but we live in a country where there’s peace, security and a high standard of living.

But imagine you were part of a people that was oppressed. Imagine your country had been defeated and ruled by not just one nation – but a string of over 25 different nations over the past hundreds of years. Because this was the reality the Jews living in Jesus’ time faced day in and day out. They had been oppressed by the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks and now the Romans. Imagine the indignity and humiliation. Imagine the longing you would have, the desire to be free.

But what if in the very midst of your oppression, God had spoken to your people hundreds of years ago. What if he had promised that one day He would return to deliver his people and make everything right. That one day, He would come back to rule his people and establish his kingdom. And when that day came, there would be

restoration and reconciliation and peace. There would be justice and harmony and all peoples would recognize the rule of God.

You'd probably be pretty eager for this kingdom to come wouldn't you?

But what would this kingdom look like? How would it arrive? Even among Jews, there were very different ideas about this.

One group of Jews called the **Pharisees** believed the kingdom of God would come to earth when the Jewish people lived righteously enough by keeping the Law and all the purity rituals. Their thinking went, if we can **keep the Law perfectly**, then God will want to dwell among his people again. That's why in the gospels whenever we read about the Pharisees, they're always concerned about things like ritual purity and Sabbath-keeping.

Another group of Jews called the **Essenes** believed that the reason Israel was in the state it was in was because God was punishing them for how the temple worship services had become corrupted and compromised. They believed that one day God would send the Messiah to purify the temple and establish his kingdom again. But in order to be ready, they had to **escape the world into closed communities in order to maintain their purity**.

And finally another group known as the **Zealots** believed they could initiate the kingdom of God themselves by perpetrating acts of terror against the Roman government. The idea was if they could provoke Rome to start a war against the Jews, this would bring God's help from heaven to defeat Rome and establish his kingdom.

These were some of the radical ideas people had about the kingdom of God. But what did Jesus mean when he talked about the kingdom of God? How did the writers of the New Testament understand this? What implications are there for the kingdom of God in our lives?

When my daughter Abby was young, she loved doing puzzles! She'd get so excited she'd just take the pieces and start putting them pieces together – she never bothered to look at the picture on the box. If she was doing a Disney princess puzzle, she would choose her favourite Disney princess and find all the pieces for her and put that part of the puzzle together. Then she'd move on to the next character and then the one after that.

At the end, she'd have all these *parts* of the puzzle assembled but they didn't always fit together. They never looked like the picture on the box. That's because she didn't know what the big picture looked like. She knew what *parts* of the picture looked like but not the *whole* picture.

When it comes to us, our lives are also like puzzle pieces in a box. While we might want to figure things out on our own, our lives are not the picture that's on the box. **The picture on the box is the kingdom of God.** It's a picture that explains God's plans for his creation. It's a picture that describes the great story of God's unfolding plan from Genesis to Revelation. It's a picture that defines our identity and calling in the context of all the other pieces. It's a picture that describes true and ultimate reality.

So what does this picture look like? What is this kingdom of God?

Put simply, the kingdom of God is about **God's will... to restore God's world... through God's people... in God's time.** It's about God's rule breaking into history and into our world in a decisive and new way to bring restoration to God's lost creation. This is the definition Cornerstone will be using this year as we explore this concept. We'll be unpacking this definition in the coming weeks.

This morning, we're going to focus on the first part of this definition – God's will. Often when we think about God's will, we tend to think about it in terms of What is God's will for my life? Should I take this job? Should I buy this house? Should I marry this person? These are examples of trying to discern God's personal will for my life.

But the answers to these questions can only be rightly derived from the answer to the much grander question concerning God's will – **What's the big picture?** Because just gathering the puzzle pieces that relate to our own lives don't make up the picture on the box. They're only part of a bigger picture.

And so our lives only make sense as we see them as part of that big picture. Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done." (Matthew 6:10) In other words, where God's kingdom has come, there God's will is done.

There is a picture on the box and that picture is the kingdom of God.

But what happens so often is that people fail to grasp this picture. The Pharisees didn't see it - they were too obsessed with religious rule keeping. The Essenes didn't see it - they were too obsessed with escaping the world to maintain purity.

The Zealots didn't see it - they were too obsessed with trying to overthrow Rome with violence and hatred.

Each of these groups was shaped by their respective cultures. Each of these groups had developed certain worldviews – certain ways of seeing the world and understanding it through their narrow filter. That's just how life works.

We're blind to our own worldviews and biases because we assume that's just how the world works. Like the glasses I wear, I often don't know they're there. I don't spend my day looking at my glasses themselves. I just see through them. And because we don't consciously think about our worldview, we tend to be oblivious to how it shapes how we think about the world.

Now, here's a scenario for you. Imagine you were a historian living in the future. Your job is to study the people who lived in 21st century North America. The question you're asked is report on is: **What shapes the worldview of people living in the 21st century North America?**

One of the hallmarks of our culture is the inordinate value it places on the individual. This characteristic is known as individualism.

One of the featured resources this year on the kingdom of God is a great book called Kingdom Come by Allen Wakabayashi. We've placed an order for these books and will have them available for sale at cost when they come in. We'll keep you posted.

Wakabayashi describes in easy to understand language what Jesus teaches about the kingdom and spells out the implications for us today.

Listen to what he says about the individualism in our culture.

“Individualism is a cognitive framework that sees only the individual at the centre of everything. Decisions are made to serve one's individual needs. The purpose of life is interpreted as promoting the lives of individuals. Dreams and aspirations that help individuals get ahead are nurtured.” (Allen Wakabayashi)

Do you see this around you? In the movies, who are the heroes and heroines? They're the ones who seek to live life to its fullest and refuse to conform to the expectations of society. In our career decisions, how do we usually evaluate our options? It's usually based on salary and benefits and how it will advance my own personal ambitions and dreams and financial goals.

In our relationships, how do people usually decide whether or not to spend time with other people? It's usually based on the answer to the question: Will this benefit me? Will I get anything out of it? In many other cultures, people just hang out because it's just good to be together with others.

Here's a question: Do you think individualism can creep into the church? Of course it does. Have you ever heard someone say, I'm shopping around for a church. I'm looking for a church that will meet *my needs*. Or, ironically have you ever heard someone say, I need to join a small group so that the group can help *me* to grow in my personal relationship with Jesus. Or I need others to support and encourage me. Have you heard Christians get all worked up because the preaching or worship style doesn't meet their personal preferences?

Having said that, of course there's a place for finding the right church fit and for finding a small group that will help you to grow and being able to identify with the church's worship services. But the individualism in our culture can take it to the extreme to the point where we think it's all about ME and we forget that it's not about ME! This is God's church and we're invited to be part of something bigger than just ourselves.

It's funny how **our individualism can distort how we see the world**. Bestselling authors Chip and Dan Heath wrote an article called The Myth of the Garage. In this article, they point out that there seem to be so many stories about brilliant entrepreneurs who built hugely successful companies out of nothing. And usually as the story goes, where does it all begin? It begins with them working by themselves in their garage. Have you ever noticed that?

From Steve Jobs, to Michael Dell to the founders of YouTube they all seem to have generated these multi-billion dollar companies all on their own.

Two researchers from the Haas School of Business at UC Berkley however have debunked this myth of the garage. In their paper, they write, the garage "evokes the image of the lone individual who relies primarily on his or her extraordinary efforts and talent" to triumph. The reality is that successful founders are usually "organizational products."

Christopher Columbus is another example of this. We all know he wanted to prove he could reach India by sailing west. We all know that no one believed his theory that the earth was round. Even his own sailors were terrified of falling off the edge of the world and his crew almost mutinied.

But according to historical sociologist James Loewen, this version of Columbus is also a myth. In fact, most people in his day knew that the world was round. Also, his ships actually enjoyed great sailing conditions and there was never any mention of mutinous talk from the crew. And what he actually set out to find was gold, not to prove the world was round.

Chip and Dan Heath conclude, “as stories are told and retold, they evolve. They come to emphasize individuals, not [communities]...”

This is important – let’s listen to that again – “as stories are told and retold, they evolve. They come to emphasize individuals not communities. If this is true, **do you think it’s possible that that the story of God, the gospel message as it’s been told and retold, has evolved to emphasize the individual?**

What do you think? We could actually put that to the test quite easily. All we need to do is take the gospel message that we’ve learned and see if it’s true to the Bible and if it has an “individualistic” bias.

So here goes my attempt to summarize the gospel message. This is the way I learned it and probably many of you as well.

- We are all sinners who have rebelled against God.
- Our sins must be paid for in order for us to be with God, but we are unable to pay for them.
- Jesus has come to die on the cross to pay for our sins so that we might be reconciled to God.
- All who believe in Jesus and what he has done for us on the cross can have eternal life in heaven.

How many of you would affirm this presentation of the gospel as biblical? Many of these statements are true and they can be found in the Bible.

But do we see Jesus ever giving this gospel presentation. He doesn’t. If you wanted to find a passage in the gospels to present this message, you won’t find it. Even in the book of Acts when the Christian leaders like Peter and Stephen were standing up to share the gospel, you never see this formula.

Another problem is that it’s very individualistic. It’s about individuals going up into heaven. Is that really what the Bible teaches?

If you were to use this story as your big picture to build your puzzle, you'd have a lot of pieces left over. What do you do with the pieces in the Bible that

- talk about how God is working to restore the goodness of everything he made and is creating a new heavens and a new earth?
- Or what about the pieces about God forming a people (not a collection of individuals) to carry out his purposes in the world?
- Or what about the pieces that our personal mission isn't to pursue our own ambitions and comfort but to die to our self and to live for the sake of others.

I could go on and go. It's true that Jesus died on the cross so that we could have forgiveness of sins but that's not the overriding theme of Jesus' teaching. That's not the "picture on the box".

The central motif, the great theme of the Bible is the message of the kingdom of God. It's God's will to restore God's world through God's people in God's time. That's the big picture.

I know for probably most of us, myself included when I came across this – this can be pretty overwhelming. All this talk of paradigms and individualism can be pretty intense.

This morning, there were just two points I wanted to make. **One, there is a "big picture" and the "picture on the box" is the kingdom of God. And two, our capacity to grasp this "big picture" is distorted by the individualism in our culture.**

So where do we go from here? My challenge for you and for me, is just to be open. To have an open heart and mind. To simply be open to what God wants to say. There's a great example of this in the book of Acts.

Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character... for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)

We're not asking you to blindly believe everything you hear. Get into your Bibles, study, read up on it.

Take advantage of the Resources we're recommending. Do one of these studies with your small group. Sign up for the Surprised by Hope Semester Group. Pick up a copy of Kingdom Come when we make it available for sale.

In Jesus' time, there were many different and distorted ideas of the kingdom of God. Now if you were to walk up to a Pharisee and asked, "Is there even a tiny possibility you could be wrong about your idea of the kingdom of God?" What do you think he'd say? He'd probably say, "Away from me you Gentile dog!" But after that, he'd probably say, "Of course I'm right", as would the Essene and the Zealot.

In a way, you can't blame them. Like you and me, they grew up in cultures that taught them to see things the way they do. They learned their values from their rabbis. As kids they grew up with these stories in Sunday school. They probably sang songs about it and hung out with other people who reinforced those ideas.

We know that Jesus' central message was the kingdom of God. And John the Baptist's role was to prepare people for that message. He comes when there's all this confusion and distortion about the kingdom.

So what does John the Baptist say? What one word could almost summarize his message? **Repent.**

¹ In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:1-2)

Usually when we hear this word, we think it means to feel bad about ourself or something we did. But that's not what it means. It actually means to "**change direction**" to "**turn around and go the other way**" or to "**stop what you're doing and do the opposite instead**".

And what I find so fascinating and it's never really hit me until this week when I was preparing for this sermon is that what John the Baptist is doing is challenging people to confront their distorted versions of the kingdom of God. Because the true kingdom has now come in Jesus.

We are invited to re-evaluate the "picture on the box" we've inherited from our culture. The Apostle Paul challenges us to consider how our cultural values like individualism, line up with God's will.

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Romans 12:2, The Message

During this series, you're going to hear familiar Bible stories and passages. You will likely assume you know what they're all about. You're going to hear implications of the kingdom that will require radical change on your part. And that will scare you. You will hear new ideas that could challenge your core beliefs. You can wrestle with them or just let them bounce right off you. You may find yourself wanting to go back to what you knew and ignore all that you're hearing.

My encouragement and challenge to you is just be open. Listen to what God wants to show you about his kingdom. Be open to change your thinking. Be willing to go in a different direction. Even after Jesus' resurrection, his own disciples still failed to comprehend what the kingdom of God was about – so this is going to take time, it's gonna be a process and that's okay. We've got time and we'll be going through this journey together.