The Most Important Message Jesus Taught – And Why Every Leader Must Get It



What is the most important message that Jesus taught? Was it his message about Love? Acceptance? Compassion? Forgiveness? Faith? Hope? That miracles are possible?

These powerful messages were all woven throughout his most important message, but there was one message that would "rule them all," give them each a context, and make their meanings distinct from all the fashionable, sentimental meanings our culture makes up for them today.

It was his message on the *Kingdom of God*, and it makes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – as well as humanity's beginning and end – all come together in one great cosmic masterpiece.

Mark 1:14-15 ESV *"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'"*

In fact, not only was it the central message that Jesus preached, but it was also the one he sent his disciples to preach – and to live. We have the same mandate.

If We Don't Get The Kingdom Of God, We Don't Get Jesus

Here's the more difficult truth – it is probably the least understood idea in all of the New Testament by pastors, worship leaders, teachers, songwriters, and average Christians everywhere. But if we don't get the message of the Kingdom of God, then I contend that *we don't get Jesus at all.*

A few years ago, I asked my good friend and colleague, New Testament scholar Dr. Peter Davids, to summarize the Kingdom of God in just one article, mainly for people I was training as creative leaders. Drawing on the Old and New Testaments, his own resources, and the work of many other scholars, he did it.

Here it is, a summary, for you and those with whom you lead. I asked him to write it as a primer for pastors, worship leaders, songwriters, and artists, so share it around. It's accessible to anyone, and if you are in any one of these roles, it's vital that you read, wrestle with, and absorb the following – for the sake of us all.

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What Is The Kingdom of God?

Peter H. Davids, Ph.D.

In the late 1960's this writer first came upon George Eldon Ladd's work and his development of the Kingdom of God as an important theological concept. In fact, it started a small revolution in this scholar's thought about the New Testament. Ladd's thought, while known in New Testament circles, became much more popularly known in the 1980's through John Wimber's conferences and teaching and the Vineyard movement flowing from them. Yet scholarship continued to move on, and Ladd's expression of the idea has since been modified by the work of many scholars, including that of N. T. Wright.

However, this often means that there is confusion in the minds of many people when the expression is used. They have never read Ladd, and most likely not Wright either, but they know that the concept is important. But what does it mean? We know about the United Kingdom and other remaining kingdoms in this world, but what does it mean to say that God has a kingdom? And what does that mean for followers of Jesus of Nazareth?

If that is the question you, the reader, wish answered in a short précis rather than a book-length treatise, then read on.

The Kingdom Of God: God's Rule On Earth

The expression "kingdom of God" refers to God's rule on earth, usually his rule expressed through an agent, his regent or king. In the Christian metanarrative, it refers to God's rule as announced, demonstrated, and exercised by his regent, Jesus of Nazareth, who is presently the resurrected sovereign ruler of the world and who will eventually openly rule on this earth, completing God's creational purpose.

The Christian metanarrative continues and completes the narrative of Israel. In the Hebrew Scriptures God's kingship is referred to repeatedly, especially in the Psalms (Ps 10:6; 24:8,10; 29:10; 44:4; 47:2, 6, 7,8; 68:24; 74:12; 84:3; 93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1; 145:1).

We see three aspects of God's rule:

1. God rules over creation, for he is the creator and the sustainer;

2. God rules over the nations, and he will/does bring them to judgment: and

3. God the rules over Israel, usually through the person of his king.

So in the grand narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures God is a king, and he exercises his rule through a regent, that is, the Davidic ruler of Israel. Israel, then, is in the Hebrew Scriptures God's special kingdom, a kingdom with physical boundaries. This sets the stage for a shift in the narrative as found in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Kingdom Of God: God's Political Rule

First, when Jesus uses the term "kingdom of God," he combines the second and third aspects of God's rule in the light of God's rule over all of creation. As a result, George Eldon Ladd was correct that the kingdom is not political in the sense that it does not have physical boundaries. God is not ultimately interested (other than in the sense of a historical interest) in a postage-stamp-sized territory in the Middle East.

Jesus may have initially announced the rule of God to Israel and fulfilled the roles of the expected Anointed One, but he makes it clear in his teaching (e.g. Matt 5:5) that it is the whole earth that God is concerned about and all peoples who will come under his rule (e.g. Matt 28:19-20). Yet Ladd was not correct to the extent that the term "political" does not refer to territory, a particular piece of the earth over which a government exercises sovereignty.

That is because, as noted previously, for Jesus God's rule extends to the whole world, which means that God claims universal dominion. But "Caesar" also claimed and claims dominion over the known civilized world. Therefore it was and continues to be inevitable that there would be and is a clash, since both God and "Caesar" claim sovereignty over the same people.

The Kingdom Of God: God's Rule Through Jesus

Second, when Jesus uses the term kingdom of God, he does not indicate who God's regent is – in fact, he does not refer to such a regent, certainly not in the way that John the Baptist did. However, Jesus acts with sovereign authority, and, as the gospel narrative continues, we discover that Jesus is indeed that regent (e.g. Mark 8:29, 14:61-62).

He is, according to the gospels, David's son, who is God's son. So we have in Jesus both God's rule, and the person through whom he exercises his rule. For the early members of the Jesus movement (i.e. the early church), Jesus's resurrection and ascension established him as God's exalted ruler. He already rules over those people who have submitted to his rule, and he will eventually impose his rule on everyone in the world.

Thus we have a tension between the already and the not yet. The good news is the call to all people to turn from all previous allegiances and to submit to God's rule in Jesus. It is a call to a change of allegiance, whether political, religious, spiritual, social or material, it is a call to obedience. It contains the promise that through the Holy Spirit God will empower those who give their allegiance to Jesus for this obedience and that due to his gracious favor he will forgive their past failure to submit to his rule.

The Kingdom Of God: God's One People

This calling of all people into a community under the sovereignty of God exercised through Jesus is not done as a contrast to the people of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, a negating of their narrative, nor as a parallel to their narrative, but as a fulfillment of that narrative and that people.

That is, there is one people of God, and those ethnic Jews not submitting to God's rule in Jesus are "cut off" from that people (to use Paul's metaphor in Rom 11), while all who do submit to God's rule in Jesus, from whatever national or racial background are "reborn" into God's people, inheriting the promises of Exodus 19:6, becoming both stones of and priests in the rebuilt Temple (which is a community, not a building), and therefore also becoming immigrants in the lands or peoples of their natural birth (clearly expressed in 1 Pet 1:1 – 2:10).

The Kingdom Of God: God's Demonstration Through Jesus

Jesus demonstrated God's rule through his healing the sick, driving out demons, and receiving and caring for outcasts and the poor (as seen in the four canonical gospels and referred to in Acts). He fulfilled the function of

a true king of Israel in that he delivered the oppressed, whether the oppressed be oppressed by other persons, poverty, disease, or the demonic (Luke 4:18-21, referring to Isa 61:1-2).

Naturally, the ultimate oppressor is death and the fear of death (e.g. Heb 2:14-15). And the New Testament teaches that behind all oppression is the devil. Jesus also taught God's rule, explaining what the new community should look like; that is, how his followers were to live in the present in anticipation of the new world order. Jesus lived this new world order, including dying to destroy the power of evil rather than trying to do this by force.

The Kingdom Of God: God's Demonstration Through Us

Jesus's followers are called to do the same things that Jesus did. They are called to live the values of the new community, which includes delivering the oppressed, whatever the cause of the oppression. Like Jesus, their weapons are the proclamation of the good news, the explanation of what the rule of God is like, the power of the Holy Spirit (including that experienced through prayer and meditation), and sacrificial love.

Like Jesus they are also prepared to die in the struggle with evil, knowing not only that this will break the power of evil, but also that in dying they are following their Lord and that they will also follow him in resurrection.

This demonstrates that the fear of death no longer has power over them, because they know that death no longer has ultimate power.

The Kingdom Of God: Living In Light Of The Age To Come

The kingdom community does not expect success in the terms of this age. They have rejected this age, including the sovereignty of "Caesar," including the ultimate value of money, and they are living for a new age, which is already here in part (as they experience both personally and in their calling upon God's sovereign power in Jesus to act in the world) and yet not yet here in its fullness.

Thus they "wear eschatological glasses." That is, they see everything in terms of the coming age, when God will rule openly through his king Jesus. They therefore refer to Jesus as "Lord," the term that the world uses for "Caesar," or as the Anointed One, the translation of "Christ," the term that Israel used for God's chosen king.

But naturally the real issue is not what term they use for Jesus but whether they are actually submitted to his sovereignty.

And that means living all of life in terms of what this submission means in the light of the coming manifest sovereignty that will be revealed on this earth.

About Peter Davids, Ph.D.

Peter H. Davids is one of today's most thoughtful New Testament scholars. His influence, writings, and incisive handling of the Scriptures have been an inspiration to Christian leaders around the world. Peter has taught in a wide variety of universities and seminaries, is an ordained and active Anglican priest, and writes commentaries and other significant publications. He lives in Houston, Texas with his wife Judy and teaches at Houston Baptist University. His LinkedIn Profile is here.

Training Tool: For training worship leaders, teams, and songwriters in these ideas from N.T. Wright and others, see this resource.

Question: How does Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God impact your life? In what ways could you see your way of being a Christian and a leader changed by embracing that God is demonstrating his Kingdom through us?

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About The Author:
Dan Wilt is the creator of WorshipTraining's Essentials In Worship Video Training Course for worship leaders and teams. His worship leadership blog serves up weekly tools and team encouragements at DanWilt.com.

