

November 20, 2022

RESPONDING RIGHTLY TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Luke 12:35-13:21

(9 of 11 in a series through Luke 7-15)

One of the dangers of working through a long book of the Bible—and especially taking breaks between sections as we’ve done between chapters 1-6 and 7-15—is that we can start to lose sight of the big picture, lose a sense of what holds all of this together. So this morning I want to begin by reminding us of what we saw early on in Luke’s gospel and reminding us of an important theme not only in Luke’s gospel but in the entirety of Scripture.

You may remember back in Luke 4:43, Jesus stated his purpose, saying, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God . . . for I was sent for this purpose.” And this idea of the kingdom of God shows up again and again in Luke’s gospel, and the reason is because this idea that God would reign through a human king over his world is as old as creation itself, when God made the world and put Adam over all things. Then, even after Adam and Eve sinned, God immediately promised that his reign would be instituted once more than another human king (another and better Adam). He promised in Genesis 3:15 that he’d raise up one from the woman who would come and crush the serpent’s head. He was going to one day going to make everything right, restoring his kingdom. And when you go through the Old Testament and the Lord describes what this will look like, he speaks of there being forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:31-34), the end of death (Is 25:8), and a new heavens and new earth (Is 65:17). In other words, as God would establish his kingdom again, he’d establish his king and bring his saving blessings so that everything would be made new and glorious. And so the whole Old Testament is looking for the arrival of God’s kingdom.

The element that many were thrown by, however, is that God’s king and kingdom came in a much quieter way that anyone expected. God’s king—the Lord Jesus Christ—stepped onto the scene as a carpenter’s son out of Nazareth. Not only that, but he didn’t really change anything politically. In the days of Jesus’ ministry, Rome remained in charge. Wicked people continued living and doing wicked things. Even John the Baptist (who heralded the coming of Jesus) was put in prison and later killed. Therefore, as Jesus came on the scene as the God-man, many failed to see that God had sent his king into the world and was demonstrating the power of his kingdom in and through him. As they were looking for something more revolutionary, they missed that God’s promised king was standing in front of them. Yet, that’s exactly who Jesus is. He is God’s promised king of the line of David. He’s the Messiah. And with his coming, God was demonstrating his reign. His kingdom had invaded this world. We see it every time Jesus heals, casts out a demon, raises the dead, or forgives sinners. It’s why Jesus answered his adversaries saying that if he casts out demons by the power of God, “then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (11:20).

Therefore, even though many are rejecting him as God’s king and his disciples seem at times a bit clueless as well as to what Jesus is doing, Jesus begins to tell the crowds and his disciples

what is demanded of them now that God's kingdom has entered the world through the reign of Jesus. If God's king is here, then surely we must respond appropriately, right? Jesus makes that clear. And as Jesus notes these demands you and I need to listen up and make sure that we are responding rightly to God's king. Because Jesus' coming meant the arrival of God's reign (or kingdom), I'll frame each point in terms of what the kingdom brings. And, first, I want to note that the kingdom brings responsibility.

The kingdom brings responsibility

The reality is that those who anticipated God's king and God's kingdom coming with apocalyptic power to destroy God's enemies and save his people weren't wrong. That will happen. It just won't happen until Jesus returns in glory at the resurrection. The kingdom began with his first coming and will be fully manifested at his second coming. That's why many have described the kingdom as being already here but not yet here fully. And because of that, it puts us in an interesting place. We know the king (Jesus) has come and is reigning at God's right hand. But at the same time, we are waiting for him to return and manifest his reign fully. Therefore, Jesus uses a parable to tell us that as we are waiting for the return of our king—not knowing when it will be—we need to live in faithful obedience to him.

Jesus tells us to “stay dressed for action and keep [our] lamps burning” (12:35). That is, don't fall into complacency and start drifting or slacking in our obedience. Rather, he tells us to be like servants who are waiting for their master to return from a long trip. They don't know when he'll return, but they need to be ready and awake when he comes. In fact, Jesus says that when the master comes and finds his servants being faithful, he will come and “dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them” (12:37). In other words, Jesus is saying that the blessing that will come to God's children at his coming is so glorious that it's beyond comprehension—like a master taking on the role of a servant and serving them. And so he clearly says, “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (12:40).

Now, as Peter hears this, it provokes him to ask Jesus, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?” (12:41). Interestingly, Jesus doesn't answer directly, but he seems to imply that it is for everyone—especially since all should be his followers. Then, Jesus pictures what a faithful manager of the household servants would look like. He's providing food at proper times and taking care of things properly. Again, he's just doing what his master has commanded him. That servant, Jesus says, will be set over all the master's possessions. But if he decides that his master is delaying and starts beating the servants, getting drunk, and the like, he will suffer severe punishment. In fact, Jesus says he will “cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful” (12:46). Then, after noting that the punishment will vary according to one's knowledge, Jesus says, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more” (12:48).

Jesus makes quite clear that we bear responsibility while we wait for his return. You and I have to be good stewards of what he's given us. And when you consider the knowledge of Scripture

we have, the financial resources we possess, and the freedom we've been shown to obey Jesus, you and I have been given as much as any believers in the history of the world. So let's make sure that we're not growing lax as we wait for Christ to come. Take some time to examine how you use your time, how you use your money, and how you're doing in terms of obeying what you know Christ has commanded you. This might even be a good family conversation together, asking each to examine himself or herself and evaluate these things. The master is returning one day, and we want to be found faithful when he comes. But we also need to understand as we await Christ's return that life can be challenging until that day because the kingdom brings division and struggle.

The kingdom brings division and struggle

As Jesus begins the next section, he uses language that may not make sense to us. He says, "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled" (12:49). What does he mean? Well, fire can refer to a couple of different realities in the Scripture. It can refer to judgment. For example, as Jeremiah speaks words of judgment against his hearers, we are told that his words are like fire that consumes people (Jer. 5:14; 23:29). Likewise, Amos warns Israel to repent lest the Lord "break out like fire" (Amos 5:6). At the same time, however, fire can be used to refer to cleansing and purification as we see in Isaiah 4:4 and Acts 2:3.¹ Therefore, when the Lord says that he wishes the fire were already kindled, it seems that the Lord is saying that he is ready to bring about the work of salvation and judgment. Similarly, then, when he mentions that he has a "baptism to be baptized with" (12:50), he's referring to his death—a necessary work in order to bring about divine judgment and salvation.

But judgment and salvation have not yet come completely. The wicked still do wickedly and we await the day of our full salvation. We still wait for them at the second coming. And because of that, we live in a time when the righteous and wicked live together. Those who love Jesus and those who hate him occupy this same world, the same workplaces, and the same families. That's why Jesus reminds us that his coming doesn't bring peace but division. He says, "For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law" (12:52-53).

This is what happens when some in a family bow the knee to Jesus and others don't. There's division. My guess is that we've all known this to some degree. But Jesus wants this to be clear. When we place our faith in Christ we shouldn't expect harmony and peace on all sides. In fact, our trusting in Christ can actually *create* division.

¹ The above references and descriptions of how the Bible uses "fire" come from Thomas Schreiner, *Luke, Expository Bible Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 925.

I was speaking with a young lady recently who noted that if she placed her faith in Christ, then she would then have to acknowledge that all her unbelieving friends are condemned apart from Jesus. And this idea caused her struggle. What would they think? How would it affect their relationships? Well, she's right. But it's also the case that unbelievers are condemned whether we acknowledge it or not, and so we should believe the gospel ourselves and urge them to believe as well lest they face him in judgment.

But this reality that Jesus brings division is helpful for us to acknowledge. Don't let it shake you when the unbelieving world opposes you and your obedience to Jesus and his word. This is what Jesus said would happen. It's what he says here that he came to do. And don't hesitate to obey the Lord, even when it affects your unbelieving family or friends. Don't say to yourself, "It's not worth speaking the truth because I don't want to make my relationships awkward." Jesus came to create awkward relationships, and it's why he makes clear to us that we must love him above all others in this world to be worthy to be his disciples. So, realize that the kingdom brings division and struggle. And, third, we see that the kingdom brings urgency.

The kingdom brings urgency

I think that's the best way to describe what we see from Jesus' teaching in 12:54-13:9. There are many different sections within this larger section, so it can be confusing. But I think I can sum up Jesus' teaching in this section by saying that Jesus tells us to *understand that we'll soon stand before Christ in judgment, so we need to get right with the Lord now, while we can, by repenting, without delay.* Let me try to show you each of these parts. First, we need to understand that we'll soon stand before Christ in judgment.

Jesus makes this point in 12:54-56 by pointing out that the unbelieving crowds around him can look at the sky and know that a shower is coming or see the south wind blowing and know it will be hot that day, but here is God's Son, the promised Messiah, standing in front of them, and they don't see it. And one day soon they would die (as will we), and one day all of us will stand in judgment. This is a reality we all must understand. And it has implications. If we're going to stand before Christ in judgment, then, we need to be reconciled to the Lord now, while we can.

Jesus makes this point in 12:57-59. He imagines someone going before a judge with his accuser, knowing that he's guilty and knowing that he'll be punished. And Jesus points out that only a fool wouldn't try to settle with his accuser in that circumstance rather than being dragged before a judge and being put in prison. His point, obviously, is that we need to think the same way with regard to our divine judge. All of us will stand before judgment someday, and—apart from Christ—all of us are guilty in our sin and without excuse. Why would anyone go stand before an earthly judge in that situation, let alone the divine judge. Or, we might ask (making it personal), why in the world would you choose to die in your sin and guilt and face your divine judge when you can be reconciled to the one against whom you've sinned and who is your judge right now? That's the good news, that God has provided a means of reconciliation by sending his Son to live, die, and rise from the dead. We can hope in Christ as the one who paid our penalty for us if we

will trust in him. And this brings us to the next part. We are reconciled to our judge against whom we've sinned by repenting.

Next, Luke gives us a moment when, as Jesus was speaking, some mentioned a time when Pilate took the blood of some Galileans and mixed them with the sacrifices. Perhaps they just wanted Jesus to denounce Pilate. We don't know. But instead he asked them if they thought that the Galileans who were killed were worse sinners than others. Then he brings up those who were killed by a falling tower and asked the same question. And then Jesus answers the question himself, saying, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (13:5).

Jesus is saying that every time we see someone die, we should allow it to remind us that we may well soon die as well, and so we need to repent in order to be prepared for death. We need not judge who suffer but recognize our own guilt instead. And the reason Luke includes this episode after Jesus saying that we need to get right with our accuser before trial is because Luke is telling the reader how to get right with God. We repent of our sins and self-reliance and turn to the crucified and risen Lord in faith, trusting in him. But it all begins with repentance. And finally we're reminded that we need to repent, without delay, while we can.

Jesus makes this point by telling another parable. He tells of a fig tree that was planted in a vineyard, and for three years the owner of the vineyard would come to get fruit, but there was none, and so he decided to cut it down. However, a man tending to the tree said to the owner of the vineyard, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put out manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down" (13:9).

What Jesus is saying is that the unbelieving Israelites are like this tree. They've had all kinds of opportunity to repent (i.e. bear fruit like the tree), and they haven't. And if judgment happened right now, it'd be just. But the Lord is giving them more time. With every breath, they're shown grace. But make no mistake, they're on extended time which they are not owed. And so they need to repent without delay.

Interestingly, Luke puts all of these episodes and teachings in Jesus' ministry together in this section in order to make clear that we need to *understand that we'll soon stand before Christ in judgment, so we need to get right with the Lord now, while we can, by repenting, without delay.* This is the message that you and I need to take to the world because the kingdom brings with it urgency. Jesus is the king. He's coming to save and to judge. But on that day it'll be too late. So repent now and do not delay. He's already being gracious by giving this time to repent. We must make that clear as we preach the good news of the kingdom of God. And, finally, we see that the kingdom brings hope.

The kingdom brings hope

In 13:10-17 we get a picture of an unbelieving Israelite missing that God's promised king is right in front of him. It's the Sabbath, and Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when he spots a woman who was afflicted by a demon, making it so that she couldn't stand upright but was bent over.

And this torment had been going on for eighteen years. So Jesus calls her over, lays his hands on her, and heals her, saying, “Woman, you are freed from your disability” so that she stands up straight (13:13-14). And you’d think that everyone would be thrilled at this miracle but instead the ruler of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus had done what he considered to be working on the Sabbath.

Jesus points out the man’s hypocrisy, however, noting that he’d happily untie his ox or donkey on a Sabbath and lead it to get a drink of water because he’d want to be merciful to his animal, but he was upset with Jesus showing mercy to one much more valuable than an ox or donkey. She’s not only a human but a fellow Israelite. And Luke tells us that as Jesus said this, “his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him” (13:17).

This is a picture of one missing the kingdom of God unfolding right in front of him. Jesus was bringing healing and freedom, driving out the enemy, and giving freedom to this woman. These are the very things that the OT said would come with God’s kingdom, and yet this man doesn’t want to recognize Jesus as God’s king.

Now, again, one could say that the reason it was hard to recognize God’s kingdom simply in this woman being healed was because they expected much more (again, enemies destroyed, etc.). But Jesus addresses this point with two parables. First, he compares the kingdom to a mustard seed (which is quite a small seed) being planted in the ground and eventually producing a tree that is large enough for birds to nest in. Then, he compares it to leaven in a bunch of flour that causes all the bread to rise. And when I say a bunch of flour, three measures of flour is 128 cups of flour, which when adding water would have produced a little more than 100 pounds of dough.²

So, you can see that Jesus just pointed out two small things—a mustard seed and leaven—that grew to a large tree or affected over 100 pounds of dough. And his point seems to be that though God’s kingdom looks small and insignificant now—as it is just Jesus standing in front of them, healing a woman so that she can stand up straight—one day they will see the full manifestation of it.

And doesn’t that fill us with hope? One day we’ll see the full manifestation of Christ’s reign. We’ll know a new heavens and a new earth with no more pain, sin, disease, death, and on and on. And we’ll reign alongside our Lord, knowing that the enemy has been judged and we’ll get to delight in our Lord forever. That day is sure. So, until then, let’s be responsible stewards, obeying our master until he comes, with urgency pressing others to be reconciled to him by repenting and being made right with their judge before that day. And let us give thanks that our judge is our redeemer by coming to the table now. Amen.

² Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 118.