

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

26.4.15

The upside down Kingdom - Joss Bray

Last week we looked at seven of the 12 parables that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God. Today we will look at the next three.

We found that the Kingdom is very precious - far beyond anything else we have. In fact it is to be eagerly looked for and sought out and then held on to. There is nothing that we can give up that remotely compares to what we gain. This is what Jesus taught:

MT 6:28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Remember, it's seeking the Kingdom that should come first and his righteousness - we'll explore that a bit more later.

We also saw that it is a growing Kingdom - it isn't static. It is expanding and bearing fruit. The Kingdom is coming in increasing power and we need to keep praying like Jesus taught us "your kingdom come - your will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

We remembered that the Kingdom of God is within us - as well as in the heavenly realms. In fact, wherever Jesus is Lord and King - that's where His kingdom is. And we noted some reassurance - that even if there are a few weeds left in our lives from the past - things the enemy has sown in - God will not be weeding those out in this life if it would uproot everything else too much.

We know that when we get to be with him forever in eternity, all the weeds will be burned up and thrown out. In the heavenly realms there is no more crying or pain or sin or guilt. There will be no weeds in the heavenly garden.

Meanwhile we cultivate the Kingdom in our lives and do not feed the weeds! As the fruit of the Kingdom increases, the weeds will wither. Sins can be forgiven, guilt can be removed - but scars do remain. We should pay attention to the positives of the Kingdom and remember scars are just that - scars of old wounds that should no longer be active. They may give an odd twinge here or there or a reminder of the past at times - but they will all be dealt with in eternity. Seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness means just that - not seeking first other things - which may also be good - but not the first priority.

We can get distracted by looking for things like healing or provision of needs or experiences of the Holy Spirit or even good works. These are all kingdom things and are definitely to be welcomed - but our first priority is His Kingdom coming in our lives - His righteousness. Living for Him first - doing our heavenly Father's will. Being focussed on Him is the top priority - it was Jesus's top priority - so it should be ours. Everything else will follow from that.

So with this foundation let's look at the next three parables

The unrepentant servant - or the forgiving king:

MT 18:23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

So in the Kingdom of heaven - there is forgiveness which covers a huge amount of sin. Ten thousand talents was the equivalent of millions of pounds. This is an example of Jesus taking things to the max to make a point and make people listen. The king took pity and forgave the debt of his servant. He didn't even require for any pay back, even over an extended time as the servant had asked. He wiped the slate clean. This is just as God does with us when we seek forgiveness.

However, the king's servant did not follow the lead of his master. He didn't treat his servant as he had been treated. Then there was a very high price to pay. God expects us to forgive just as we have been forgiven - remember the Lord's prayer:

MT 6:12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Debts are also translated as trespasses or sins of course. Let's not make the same mistake as the king's servant. Let's make sure there is no unforgiveness in our hearts towards anyone - not easy of course - and it's not what the world teaches us. It takes effort and a change of mind to get rid of bitterness and anger and unforgiveness. Certainly God helps us in this and as the fruit of the kingdom grows in us, then other things diminish - but there is still a conscious effort needed to change our minds and not be slaves to unforgiveness. After all - it is actually for our own good!

Next - the grumbling workers - or the generous employer:

MT 20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said,

and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

So the kingdom isn't "fair"? Well actually, it is. The landowner gave a fair wage to the people he hired first - it was just that he was more generous to the later ones. Jesus makes the point that God will do whatever he wants to - and it is not up to us to be critical of his generosity. Remember that on the cross, Jesus told a repentant thief that he would be with him in paradise. That hardly seems fair does it to all those other people who follow Jesus for many years at great cost, when this thief on the cross - who had never even bothered about Jesus, can be saved at the last minute! He didn't even have a chance to do any good works!

But Jesus is very clear - and it is like the unforgiving servant who did not share his master's generosity. We need the heart of the Father to welcome everyone who comes to faith and also not get disgruntled because others appear to be more "blessed" than we are. However, this can be a great temptation at times for us. And again it is not what the world teaches - where so much is about envy and wanting what others have. That is not the kingdom way - and indeed, who the world sees as the last in line for blessing will in fact be the first.

Finally, the ungrateful wedding guests - or the welcoming king:

MT 22:1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' "But they paid no attention and went off--one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in

to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

So the King initially invited guests to this wedding banquet prepared for his son. This could well have been a reference to the Jews - who were the chosen people for God's favour. The invited guests either ignored the King and did their own thing or mistreated the messengers and killed them. Again, there is the parallel to the prophets in the Old Testament who were often mistreated and then of course to Jesus himself who was killed. The king was cross and vengeance came for those who murdered his servants.

Then the king changed his strategy and extended the invite to everyone off the streets - "good and bad". So the people were gathered in for the banquet. However, there was a catch. Although all were invited, it turns out they needed to have wedding clothes. Good and bad people of all sorts were invited - that was not the criterion to eat at this great banquet. What mattered to the king was - did they have the right clothes on?

So what's that all about? Surely clothes aren't important in the Kingdom of heaven? Well it depends what sort of clothes we are talking about. This is what Isaiah said:

ISA 61:10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,

So it is a different sort of clothes that the parable refers to. It is a robe of righteousness indicating that the wearer has been made right with God and is eligible to be at the banquet - that is - to be in the Kingdom. But it can't be put on by man. In Paul's letter to the Romans he says:

RO 3:21 But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

This robe of righteousness only comes through faith in Jesus - because he is the only one who has paid the full price for it. Everyone else - that's you and me - have fallen short and were not entitled to wear it. It is now a gift, bought by Jesus for us to wear to the heavenly banquet - a divine entrance ticket as it were.

And we can also read about this heavenly clothing in the book of Revelation:

REV 7:9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

Here we see no division between people; everyone has been invited from all over the place, no matter who they were. And those who by faith are made righteous - i.e. right with God and wearing that robe of righteousness - they are the ones who make it in the end to the heavenly kingdom.

So is it an upside down kingdom or one that is the right way up?

We see from these three parables that the principles that apply in the kingdom of God are not the principles that we so often see in the world around us.

Firstly, we have learnt about the vital importance of forgiveness to others- just as we have been forgiven much.

Secondly, we have seen that there is no room for grumbling and envy in the kingdom - God blesses and saves as he wishes.

Finally, the only way to be part of the kingdom of God is to be made righteous. We cannot earn or bluff or way in. We must be put right with God - by faith in Jesus - it's his gift for us.

So the Kingdom of God and his righteousness go together - and we are to seek them wholeheartedly. Next time we'll look at the last two parables about the kingdom - and they are about getting ready for coming King.