

Two Kingdoms Converge

Luke 6:12-19

You have all heard of *The Sermon of the Mount* in Matthew’s gospel. I cling to no delusions that my little title for this similar sermon from Luke, *The Manifesto in the Meadow*, will catch on with quite the same household recognition. In fact, many New Testament scholars insist that the two sermons are one and the same, but I throw my lot in with those who say they are distinct.

In Luke, Jesus gives four beatitudes commencing with the words “Blessed are ...” instead of eight as in Matthew. That’s easy to reconcile. Luke did not record all eight. But, Luke balances his four beatitudes with four warnings commencing with the words, “Woe to you ...” Matthew includes no such warnings. And, even in the case of the beatitudes that seem similar, there are noteworthy differences. Where Matthew’s beatitudes touch on the spiritual demands of righteousness (how as sinners we must humbly approach the righteousness of God), Luke seems to be more interested in the behavioral demands of righteousness. In other words, in Luke, Jesus blesses the “have nots” of the world and warns the “haves” of the world, perhaps, implying that these “haves” have exploited, or at least, disregarded the plight of the “have nots.”

Themes common to Luke and Matthew do not appear in both sermons. In Matthew, the *Lord’s Prayer* appears in the *Sermon on the Mount* as an example of how to not pray like Pharisees and hypocrites. Luke’s account of the prayer does not appear in this *Manifesto in the Meadow*, but, rather, some chapters later, in a more intimate setting where Jesus responds to the request of His closest disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1).

For me, more speculation is required to make these sermons one rather than to simply treat them as two. As Jesus introduced the Kingdom, I suspect that there were certain things He said on many occasions, any time a hungry crowd gathered. He was initiating a revolutionary new way to look at assessing value, wealth, law-keeping, righteousness, worship and love. The platform He was proposing for His kingdom did not change a great deal from one crowd to the next.

Still, there are a number of differences between Matthew’s *Sermon on the Mount* and this message in Luke that I think evidence a different context. In Luke, a more thorough development of opposition to Jesus is present. He has raised the ire of the Pharisees for seeming to forgive sin by His own authority. They have not been at all thrilled with the company He has been keeping. He has not been observing the fasts that they think are befitting of a rabbi and He has done works of mercy on the Sabbath day, which they think is a breach of the Sabbath principle of not working. In Matthew’s sermon, Jesus speaks against the backdrop of Pharisaic, hypocritical righteousness, as though they are third-person examples of how “not to do righteousness.” In Luke’s sermon, the Pharisees are clearly in the audience, and Jesus targets them directly.

The atmosphere leading up to this sermon in Luke is more threatening. Danger is in the air. Jesus will more blatantly throw down the gauntlet in the presence of friends and enemies. Until now, Jesus has played the role of Prophet, Teacher, Healer, Miracle-worker and Social Reformer. Now, He will exert His kingly authority and declare “This is how the Kingdom of God is going to be.” This message from Luke conveys more of the tone of a manifesto - as if a political or social movement is formalizing its platform and presenting its program to the masses.

The next day would be a big day. From the crowd that followed Him, He must set apart a few men to uniquely represent Him and His kingdom to a world expecting something quite different. Tomorrow, He must select these key men. He must draw His line in the sand. But, first ...

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This message really isn't about prayer, but it would be irresponsible to let this detail pass without noting it. Jesus needed to pray. In fact, on the eves of the most significant days of His life, He felt a need to pray all night. The popular yearning today seems to be to reduce the kingdom of God to some enterprise that we can advance by reading all the right books, initiating all the right programs, picking the brains of all the right experts, emulating all the right models and imitating all the big success stories. Philip Wiebe writes pointedly, if not a touch sarcastically:

“When Jesus went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray, we can rest assured He wasn't heading off for the latest Rabbi Retreat featuring "The Day's Most Dynamic Communicators" along with "The Finest in Contemporary Jewish Music.”

Jesus needed to pray. Guidance by, empowerment from and companionship with the Father are what He felt He needed most. This is a powerful indictment of our age of Christian pragmatism.

I. The Early Kingdom Organization (12-16)

¹²One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. ¹³When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: ¹⁴Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, ¹⁵Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

A. The King Selects Twelve Emissaries

Would Jesus face similar challenges trying to find good help as do human resource managers today? *The Wisconsin State Journal* surveyed vice presidents and personnel directors of the nation's largest corporations for their most unusual hiring interviews. Their stories included:

- A job applicant who challenged the interviewer to arm wrestle
- A candidate who said he had never finished high school because he had been kidnapped and kept in a closet in Mexico
- An applicant who interrupted the questioning to phone her therapist for advice.
- A balding candidate who excused himself, then returned wearing a full hairpiece.

We don't know how many disciples Jesus called to Himself on this occasion. It could have been a crowd of dozens or a multitude of hundreds. We don't know from where they all came. Had some been healed of debilitating diseases by Jesus? Some may have had their minds restored from the horrible grip of demons. No doubt, many were simply patriotic Jews drawn to Jesus by the promise that God's Kingdom was near. In any event, Jesus deemed it time to set apart twelve of them and to begin building His kingdom through them. He chose them, not according to the conventional wisdom of the world, but by prayer. This ordination would demand not simply a call to learn of Him, but also a call to represent Him. He designated them "apostles."

An “apostle,” which means “one sent,” represents his Master’s authority. Paul sometimes applied the word to all the eyewitnesses of the resurrected Lord that were sent out as His missionaries, but when the term is used of the twelve men named here, it refers to a status of unique authority in the church through the ages. These men left their previous lives as they had known them to be with Jesus. They walked with Him. They learned at His feet. They saw His miracles, and they processed the lessons of those miracles. They became eyewitnesses to everything He did and the human depositories of all the words that He uttered. They were the pillars of the early church.

Very little biographical information is known about any of them, but that is not important to us today. They were well known in the early church. The most crucial thing that we need to understand about them is that their testimony about Christ was regarded as the measuring rod against which all testimony about Christ was to be tested. Jesus promised them His own presence when they taught in His Name. They represented the Lord’s own plan for getting His kingdom off the ground. If some archaeologist unearths some crazy, ancient book about Jesus, its veracity stands or falls by their testimony. If some silly movie director claims that the earthly remains of Jesus have been found in a tomb, he can be confidently dismissed as a crackpot, not because of our religious superstition, but because of their eyewitness testimony to His Resurrection.

The Apostles are our most reliable historical link to the Person of Jesus, what He said and what He did. That is why I determined at the outset of this year to spend a lot of time in the gospels to explore what Jesus had to say about our relationships with one another, about how we view wealth and matters of stewardship, about what it means to follow Him and about what it means to love God as we were created to love Him. Today, people seem to want their Christianity to either be very experiential or very cut and dried. I just want ours to be very rooted in the words of Jesus. I’m pretty sure that’s what He wanted and I’m also quite sure that’s why He called His disciples and designated twelve of them to be His unique witnesses and representatives.

B. Sometimes, Divine Wisdom Looks like Human Madness

The world would look at these men and wonder: “After praying *ALL* night, *THIS* is the bunch Jesus settled on?” The eye of man would behold this group and see very little hope for accomplishing anything. They weren’t well-known. They weren’t well-schooled. They weren’t even well-behaved. They were fickle, explosive and wholly unreliable. This could never work in any human enterprise, but heaven does not look at things in the same light as the world views them.

Most of the Twelve were Galileans. Galilee was prosperous enough. There is no reason to assume that these men were destitute. They simply could not be considered by those in the know to be the best Jews with which to work. Judean Jews were typically more scrupulous in matters of law and its rituals. Galileans were seen as being a bit country, rednecks, if you will.

Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen. Thomas and Nathanael (or Bartholomew) as well as two unnamed disciples were fishing after Christ’s death and resurrection. As many as eight of the twelve Apostles could have been fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. They may have done quite well. The point is not whether Jesus called them away from poverty or affluence, but that He would call them at all. They were fishermen, not community movers and shakers.

Matthew was a Galilean tax-collector. Most Jews hated tax-collectors. The taxation system lent itself to corruption. Tax-collectors were seen as traitors because they were Jews who collected revenues from their countrymen on behalf of the despised Roman presence. No good Jew could picture a tax-collector in *Messiah's* cabinet. Jesus mixed in one Zealot. Simon the Zealot was a member of a political party that despised, to the point of violence, everything Roman.

Some of these men were deeply spiritual, bordering on naïveté. Some of them were wholly unimaginative realists, bordering on negativity and skepticism. The one southern Jew, a man from Kerioth, a village south and west of Jerusalem, a man to whom conventional wisdom would have granted the greatest potential, turned out to be the Judas who would betray Jesus in the end.

Might Jesus have deliberately united this eclectic group so as to showcase the miracle of kingdom attitudes? No human team-builder would have recommended putting this bunch together. These men needed healing. Those Galilean fishermen had probably crossed paths with that Galilean tax-collector. How many times had Matthew gouged them before they all became disciples of Jesus? Of course, fishermen were the least of Matthew's worries. No human approach to team-building would have put a tax-collector and a Zealot together, unless of course, the objective was to "off" the tax-collector. Simon must have had to fight the occasional urge to follow Matthew into a dark alley. But now, Jesus had rendered them brothers of sorts.

As a result of prayer, Jesus knowingly chose one potential headache after another for Himself when He selected these twelve men. But, how else could the miracle of reconciliation and restoration, which is the kingdom, be showcased if these men were seen by the world as natural leaders and team players? If the gospel could work with this bunch, it could work anywhere. That is why the greatest and most commonplace scandal foisted upon the kingdom is not the moral fall of high profile leaders, but the unwillingness of the many to personally sacrifice so as "to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

II. The Early Kingdom Infiltration (12, 17-20)

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¹⁷He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, ¹⁹and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

A. The Kingdom of God Contacts the Parliament of Man

I use the word parliament in the sense of a body that represents a larger body. After a night in prayer, Jesus selected twelve of His disciples to lead on an expeditionary venture into the fallen world of man. His own disciples, residents of the villages throughout Galilee were on hand. Also present were those allegedly more religiously attuned Judeans and Jerusalemites. There were also Gentiles from the region of Tyre and Sidon. There were rich and there were poor. Somehow, the fame of Jesus' powers to heal had reached beyond cultural, racial and societal boundaries.

It seems significant to me that when Jesus stepped down from the mountain to more formally launch His program, He would encounter such a variety of characters. It was truly a cross-section of the world that would meet Jesus on that level place in Galilee. The religiously sloppy and the Pharisee, the filthy rich and the dirt poor, the Jew and the foreigner, the faithful and the skeptical, the hopeful and the cynical - they were all present to encounter the King of the kingdom of God.

But, what an odd kingdom delegation appeared; Jesus, His fishermen companions, His wild-eyed revolutionary, His tax-collector. Clearly, Jesus was initiating a kingdom not of the world, but of the heart.

B. Mere Contact Is Not Why Jesus Came to Us

Jesus' power to heal seemed especially present. I don't mean to imply that His power ebbed and flowed. Jesus' power was always present to any degree whenever He willed to use it. It is just that on this day, Luke notes that His healing power seemed especially operative. So, why this day more so than any other? I believe that it is because Jesus had a very important message to preach.

Sunday School curriculums come with suggested attention-grabbers, hooks – different publishers use different terms. The preacher looks for the perfect joke or story to capture interest in what follows. I remember one fellow who liked to introduce himself to total strangers with the words: “Hi, I'm Mike. Did you know that some people think pro wrestling is fake?” I'm not sure what kind of impression he made, but there is no doubt that he seized their full attention.

When demons are objectively on the run, when diseases are measurably healed, when physical handicaps are visibly and miraculously repaired – most of us would be fully primed to listen to whatever might follow. It is significant that after Luke records this remarkable outpouring of healing power, the very next verse says: “Looking at his disciples, he said ...” (Luke 6:20). What would follow would be the most remarkable manifesto for a kingdom that any King ever articulated, and everyone gathered on that level place in ancient Galilee was fully tuned in.

Many of us grew up in a world filled with the words of Jesus. It is difficult for us to identify with those who had ears that had never heard such things as He would say on this day. They lived in a world of “survival of the fittest,” “wealth is power,” “reputation is everything,” “if it succeeds, it must be right,” “widespread acclaim means God must be in it,” “worldly struggles mean He is not.” Jesus stepped onto that stage and essentially said, “I am here to set up My kingdom. That means I am here to turn all such values, attitudes and worldly ways of looking at reality on their head.” Over the next few weeks, we will see that this is exactly what He was saying, and nothing less.

This world in which we live is still governed by those very same values, attitudes and worldly ways of looking at reality. What is most perplexing is how so many citizens of the kingdom of God who know the words of Jesus and who can perhaps even recite His words, operate in this world as though they have never even heard such words. It is not possible for me to proclaim any divine truth that has never been proclaimed before, but it is possible that ancient words can resonate in our hearts with newness and with an authority we have tended to dismiss.