

Return To the Kingdom

John 18:28-38 ²⁸ Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover. ²⁹ Pilate then went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" ³⁰ They answered and said to him, "If He were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him up to you." ³¹ Then Pilate said to them, "You take Him and judge Him according to your law." Therefore the Jews said to him, "It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death," ³² that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die. ³³ Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered him, "Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?" ³⁵ Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?" ³⁶ Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." ³⁷ Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say *rightly* that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." ³⁸ Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all.

"Missed it by that much," that is what Don Adams as Maxwell Smart from "Get Smart" used to always say.

Barely missing something can be a terrifying thing or a frustrating thing. People in severe accidents who come out unscathed sometimes have trouble moving on with their lives as they keep reliving the scene. They keep wondering what might have happened if this or that had been an inch to the left or right. On the other hand, when there is 30 seconds left in the football game and the field goal is kicked and it just hits the upright and bounces out and the Packers lose. Or Rodgers throws the ball and it just skims off the fingers of the receiver and the game is lost just by that much, that is extremely frustrating.

In our text today Pilate "missed it by that much." The kingdom of God was right there. But Pilate dismiss it completely with the derisive, "what is truth?" and moves on. He "missed it by that much."

It is God's desire that no one miss the kingdom by that much or this much, and so the Lord calls us to return to the Kingdom.

What is this Kingdom?

As soon as we start talking about the kingdom of God we immediately run into misunderstandings simply because the English word doesn't carry the same meaning as the Greek. But also, because even the Greek word "basiliae" is inadequate.

Notice that when Pilate asks Jesus that all important question, "are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus does not answer. Three times Pilate asks before Jesus finally gives a straight answer "Yes I am a king."

It can be a little annoying when we ask someone a question three times before they finally give us a straight answer, but Jesus is not doing this to be annoying. He does it because he knows that Pilate and we also incidentally will misunderstand what Jesus is saying if he does not first explain what the kingdom of God is, and what it means that he is a king.

We pray that God would give us understanding hearts so that we do not miss the kingdom but return to it with all our whole hearts.

True or False: the kingdom of God is heaven? False

This is the failure of the English word. The English word kingdom means a place, lines you can draw on a map. Because of this and because Jesus says my kingdom is not of this world, the easy conclusion to jump to is God's kingdom is heaven. However, notice that Jesus also says, "for this cause I was born." If God's kingdom were simply heaven then Jesus coming into this world in order to be king would make no sense.

God's kingdom is not a place, it is not a place here on earth or in heaven. It is something more than that.

True or False: When we pray "thy kingdom come" we are asking Jesus to come with his angel armies on the last day and destroy all evil? False

Perhaps closer but still wrong.

The Greek word Basiliae, unlike the English word, implies activity and power. The king rules and when he rules by the power of his armies that is his kingdom or reign. According to this understanding we might think of the angel armies of the sky descending and Christ and his throne destroying all evil. There we might say is God's power in action to rule, there is the kingdom of heaven.

This is exactly the type of kingdom that Pilate would have been thinking of, and it is exactly what Jesus speaks against when he says, "my kingdom is not of this world."

He does not mean that his kingdom is not on this earth. Jesus himself says, "the kingdom is among you," and "the kingdom is near," and "the kingdom has come upon you." His kingdom is certainly found on this earth, but it is not of this earth. His kingdom is not a kingdom like the kingdoms of this world. In

other words he does not use force of armies to rule. "If my kingdom were of this world my servants would fight." That is exactly how earthly kings rule, through the power of the sword, "but now my kingdom is not of here." What he is saying is that my kingdom is not that type of kingdom.

Rather says Jesus, what is the kingdom? It is when I bear witness to the truth. Pilate's problem is that he can only understand ruling by force of arms, thus he scoffs at Jesus' statement that he rules by the preaching of truth.

When we think of the kingdom as Christ's power to destroy all evil, we really miss the kingdom. What is going to happen when I think in these terms?

This is essentially the terms in which the Jews thought. Notice how careful they are to outwardly observe the law. They do not go into the praetorium because that would make them unclean. They will not judge Jesus because they aren't allowed to put him to death. To them the law of God was not God's truth through which he ruled in their hearts. To them God's word was a means by which they could claim to be better than everyone else. Christ's kingdom was to them the judgement when God would tell them how wonderful they were and bring condemnation on everyone else.

IF we think in these terms, we will either become legalistic, so proud of ourselves for keeping the law and so judgmental of others, or we will be filled with guilt and fear cowering under God's wrath.

But God's kingdom is not his judgement on sinners.

True or False: the kingdom of God is the church, that is the people of God? False

We do have that hymn "I love thy kingdom Lord." If you want to take a look in your hymnals it is Hymn 462. It's a beautiful hymn, and I like singing it. But it is also a misleading hymn. It very much implies that the kingdom of God is the church. Actually, that hymn is even worse than that because it implies that the kingdom of God is the building. Now you can understand the hymn to be talking about the people rather than the building, but even then it is still not correct.

A kingdom is the rule of a king, that is when the king uses his power to do his will. The power of God is not people, not the angels armies of heaven, not the believers on this earth. But what does Jesus say, "for this cause I was born to bear witness to the truth." The power of God is the preaching of the truth of God.

This is essentially the way Pilate thought, the power of Rome was its armies, its people.

When we think of the kingdom of God as the people of God, we run into all kinds of problems. We look to ourselves as the power which builds God's kingdom. We look to that pastor, his ability, his speaking ability, or some other characteristic as the thing that is going to build the kingdom. And then when it finally dawns on us that we are all a bunch of hypocrites, including the pastor, that we are all failures, we lose the kingdom altogether.

People, believers, pastors, even angels, are not the power of Jesus' rule. Jesus rules through the proclamation of his truth despite the people.

True or False: the kingdom of God is the preaching of the gospel? True

Your catechism taught you that God's kingdom is "his gracious rule in our hearts." That is true but since he rules in our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel it is the same thing.

The rule of a king is the use of his power to do his will, and the power of Christ is the preaching of the Gospel.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel of God for it is the power unto salvation."

The kingdom of heaven is like, "a man sowing seed." That seed is the word, and that man is Jesus. He is preaching the word and that is the kingdom, that is his power in action.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which grows. It is like a little leaven which when put in the dough grows. Jesus preaches his word, and it grows in our hearts and in the world.

The kingdom of heaven is like a net cast out to catch fish and it pulls in many different types of fish. The word is preached, and many are drawn in by it.

The kingdom of God is the preaching of His truth which then rules our hearts. Pilate was that close, he missed it by that much. Why because he did not believe in truth.

Correctly understanding what the kingdom is will lead us by the grace of God to treasure that preaching of the forgiveness of sins, and the death and resurrection of Jesus. When we sing, I love thy kingdom Lord, the thing we love is not these four walls but hearing that truth of the forgiveness of sins. When we reach for the kingdom, we will not seek it in our works but in Christ's forgiveness. When we work for the kingdom, we will not dedicate our time and talents to military force, or politics, or humanitarian aid but to the preaching of the word.

To be clear I am not saying we won't do those things, but we will recognize them as things secondary and we won't try to seek God's kingdom or truth in those things.

God's kingdom is found in the preaching of the gospel. God's will is done when we hear our sin and believe in Jesus for forgiveness. God's power is at work when it is preached that Jesus died for our sins.

Are you a king? Yes! He is a king because he uses his power to do his will. However, his power is the preaching of the gospel and his will is that we believe and are saved.

What is truth? Jesus is truth. You are a sinner for whom he died is truth.

Amen