

senior youth week of prayer 2014
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youth ministry

accent

the resource for adventist youth leaders

A close-up photograph showing a person's arm being washed in a metal basin. Water is being poured from a clay jug into the basin. The person is wearing a white, fringed garment. The background is dark and out of focus.

The Kingdom of God

eternity now



the resource for Adventist youth leaders

Department Director
Gilbert Cangy
cangyg@gc.adventist.org

Editor
Jonatán Tejel
tejelj@gc.adventist.org

Copy Editor
Erica Jones
Jonese@gc.adventist.org

Editorial Assistant/Production Manager
Maria A. Dunchie
dunchiem@gc.adventist.org

Advisors
Hiskia Missah, Armando Miranda, Silvia Sicalo

Reviewed by the Biblical Research Institute

INFORMATION

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Editorial Matters Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome, as well as letters to the editor, youth ministry tips, youth volunteer service reports, programming and story ideas. Send manuscripts to YMA Editor at the address below.

Contact Information Phone: 301-680-6170 • Fax: 301-680-6155
Email: accent@gc.adventist.org • Website: www.gcyouthministries.org

Mailing Address

GC Youth Ministries Department,
12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600, USA.

Publisher

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TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial,	3
Read This First,	5
Introduction,	7
Day 1: Kessia Reyne Bennett,	11
The Kingdom of God It has Begun	
Day 2: Padraic “Paddy” McCoy,	19
The Kingdom of God Fable, Fairytale, or Reality	
Day 3: Tim Gillespie,	29
The Kingdom of God Transforming our World	
Day 4: Alex Bryan,	43
The Kingdom of God Counter Culture Values	
Day 5: Eddie Hypolite,	51
The Kingdom of God A Table on Earth, A Table in Heaven	
Day 6: Brandy Kirstein,	59
The Kingdom of God It is Within You	
Day 7: Dilys Brooks,	67
The Kingdom of God A Parable for Community	
Day 8: Gilbert Cangy,	75
The Kingdom of God By Grace Alone	
Discussion Queestions,	89
Keeping It Real,	94
Small Group Covenant Guideline,	96
The Writing Team,	98

Editorial

by **Japhet De Oliveira**

I was a freshman in college when the late Dr. Andrew Mustard assigned me a paper on the “kingdom of God.” I was naively super excited as I had been brought up studying extensively all matters of the last days and, of course, heaven. I even thought I could work on the millennium! That is, until I really took hold of the passages in the Gospel where Jesus declared that the kingdom of God was now! Honestly, I am not quite sure to this day how I missed that.

During the time Jesus lived on earth, there were two major perspectives when it came to the kingdom of God. The first was the reality as seen in the Roman Empire. It had moved from being a Republic to a dominion where emperors were self-declared sons of gods. This was one kingdom. The flip side was the Jewish community that had, for more than 700 years, longed for their story to be restored—for their ‘rightful’ place to be returned. That was their view of the kingdom. They had no time for the Sermon on the Mount or for the healing of the blind or even the presence of the Messiah in the form that He chose.

Along came the real Son of God, from the simple town of Nazareth, who took charge immediately and declared that the kingdom of God is here now! William Barclay’s commentary on Matthew suggests that Jesus’ teaching of the Gospel is broken into five sections, all having to do with the kingdom of God.



Japhet De Oliveira served as the writing coordinator for this project. He can be reached at japhet@the1project.org.

“They are as follows:

- a) The Sermon on the Mount, or the law of the kingdom (5–7).
- b) The duties of the leaders of the kingdom (10).
- c) The parables of the kingdom (13).
- d) Greatness and forgiveness in the kingdom (18).
- e) The coming of the King (24–5).¹

Today when I reflect on the kingdom of God, I not only think about the soon return of Jesus, but I also think about the fact that the implications of accepting Jesus in life today means I should start experiencing the Kingdom life today. Jesus did so. His disciples did so—to look after each other, to create space in this hectic world where others too can hear of Jesus and follow Him.

As you reflect on the messages in this Week of Prayer, consider some of the suggested questions at the end of each message and ask yourself this question each time: What is Jesus calling me to do differently today that would show that the kingdom of God has indeed started?

Let us, together, turn this planet around in the name of Jesus. Raise hope. Live love. ●

¹ William Barclay. The Gospel of Matthew, Volume One. iBooks. <https://itun.es/us/9WtLEl>

Read This First

1. **Start Your Planning Now.** We know that leadership sometimes changes at the end of the year, but please, if you will no longer be the AY leader next year, do not let that stop you from planning for this special week. Start your planning, develop your target, get your team together, and make sure your pastor is a part of that team.
2. **Global Youth Day Information.** Get information on the Global Youth Day project. This day will be the launch of the Youth Week of Prayer. Please visit our website, www.gcyouthministries.org, or contact your local youth director to find out how you can participate.
3. **Commit Your Prayer Warriors.** Get a team of adults together who will commit to praying for you and your ministry on a regular basis. Make sure this is a group with whom you can confidentially share both your personal and ministry prayer needs.
4. **Choose a Theme Song.** Involve your youth choir. If your church does not have a youth choir, this is the perfect time to get one started. Pick out songs that you all like and which fit the topic of each evening, or choose a song for the entire week.
5. **Start a Prayer Journal.** Nothing is greater for your personal spiritual growth than time spent in prayer. Your youth group will grow as you grow. Prayer journaling will help you encounter God in new and exciting ways. You will be able to “track” your walk with God as you go



March 15, 2014

Global Youth Day
will launch the
YOUTH
Week of Prayer

back and review answered prayers and see how He has lead you step by step each day. New, fresh ideas will come to mind as you spend time in His presence journaling your prayers. You can find many ideas online on starting and keeping a prayer journal. Just go to **www. google.com** and type in the words “starting a prayer journal.”

6. **Form a Week of Prayer Development/Review Team.**

Depending on the size of your church, this group can be four to eight persons who will go through all eight readings with you. Include on your team only interested and committed young adults and youth ministry leaders (Pathfinder, Sabbath School, etc., your pastor/s); this is important because it gives ownership to the entire group, rather than just you and your assistant. Ask the group to commit to meeting for at least three weeks—at least one week for four lessons, and an extra week to wrap things up. Be sure to identify the goal and direction you want to go, preferably at the first meeting, and choose a young person to speak for each day.

7. **Integrate Global Youth Day (GYD) into Your Week of Prayer Plans.** Ideally, GYD should be a time to teach youth how to sacrificially give of themselves by providing opportunities in the church and the community. If you are a small youth group and do not have the resources to arrange a community-based GYD event, you can use this opportunity to break down denominational barriers in the area by partnering with and pooling resources and ideas with other youth groups from other churches in your area. ●

Introduction

by **Gilbert Cangy**

Welcome to the 2014 Youth Week of Prayer.

In consultation with youth directors of the world field, we have decided to extend the 2013 yearly theme 'Mission and Service' into 2014. Last year for the Week of Prayer, we focused on social justice and the significance of being transforming agents in our society as an extension of the mission of Jesus, in anticipation of what the glorious kingdom of God will be like.

Last year's readings coincided with the launch of the Global Youth Day (GYD) and, this year as well, the first Sabbath of the WOP marks the second installment of the GYD.

This year we are looking at the same theme of the kingdom of God from a different perspective. We will explore the centrality of the kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus and what it means for us as young people today.

I was in the second year of undergraduate school studying theology at Avondale, working night shift in the sanitarium factory, when the supervisor asked me if I could sum up the mission of Jesus in six words; and the six words had to be the very words of Jesus. After several attempts, I had to give up; I simply did not know. He rebuked me and proudly sent me to Mark 1:14, 15.



Gilbert Cangy can be reached at
CangyG@gc.adventist.org

Mark describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry in these words:

"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'"

Mark points to the moment Jesus began His earthly ministry; He went proclaiming the good news of God. A significant moment in salvation history had arrived, and he defines the essence of that good news of God: "The kingdom of God is near." Here, we understand "near" as meaning to literally draw near of, is at hand, or is within reach.

Jesus describes the purpose of His coming to the world in the very same words, and this theme permeates the New Testament as a foundational motif.

"At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.' And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea" (Luke 4:42-44).

"Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (Matthew 9:35).

Luke 9:1, 2 – He sent His disciples to do the same. "When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."

Acts 1:3 – He spent His last 40 days on earth talking to those whom He would entrust the commission. "After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God."

Acts 8:12 & Acts 28:30, 31 – The Essence of Apostolic Proclamation. (8:12) “But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”

(28: 30, 31) “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”

Matthew 24; 14 – The Message to be Taken to the Whole World Before the End.

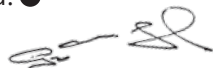
“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

The Three Angels’ Messages that are found at the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist mission are placed in the context of the everlasting gospel.

“Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Revelation 14:6).

The WOP will explore the theme of the kingdom of God and will specifically draw the attention of the readers to its present reality in the light of eschatological culmination. As Adventists we have rightly emphasized the glorious ‘not yet’ as the fulfillment of our hope. This Week of Prayer will focus the implications of our ‘blessed hope’ today.

Writers will draw from the proclamation and demonstration of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, parables, and miracles. The emphasis will be “you can enter the eternal kind of life now until time gives way to eternity.” Enter today, be transformed, be an ambassador of reconciliation, seek justice and mercy, and may our communities of faith be windows—previews of the soon coming of the glorious kingdom of God. ●





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DAY 1 | MARK 1:14-15

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

It Has Begun

by Kessia Reyne Bennett

We live in a crazy, conflicted cosmos. Our world bears witness to the controversy raging all around and within us. The powers of good and evil battle for human hearts and earthly affairs. This world is a bloody battlefield of war zones and broken homes, of debates and earthquakes, of poverty and anxiety, of deforestation and human exploitation.

Something better is coming—and coming soon! Soon Jesus is coming to make all things all new. “We have this hope that burns within our hearts, hope in the coming of the Lord.” On the great day of Jesus’ return, God will enact a renewal and recreation that cannot be stopped by any power. All the chaos will be calm, all the conflict will be cured. Heaven at last! Hallelujah!

But in the meantime, we live “in the meantime.” We live in the meantime between the perfect Eden of creation and the restored Eden of recreation. In this meantime, though our hearts long for heaven, our feet are planted firmly in the dirt of this crazy, conflicted cosmos.

If only heaven could begin now . . . Could it? Would it be possible for God to bring heaven to earth just a little ahead of schedule and for us to enjoy that kingdom now? Imagine if heaven could begin here. That’s what we want, isn’t it? That’s why, following the example of our Lord, we pray, “May Your kingdom come, may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” If only we could live in heaven now!



Kessia Reyne is the author of this sermon. She can be reached at kessiareyne@the1project.org.

The good news is—! Well, I wouldn't want to spoil it for you. I'll let Jesus tell you Himself. Turn with me to Mark 1:14-15. Listen for the good news of God! "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Mark 1:14, 15 NIV). Jesus was proclaiming, preaching, announcing the good news of God. And what is that good news? "The time has come" and "the kingdom of God has come near." The good news of God that Jesus was proclaiming is still good news today! "The time has come" and "the kingdom of God has come near."

The Time Has Come

Jesus said the time had come. What clock was He reading? A fancy, first-century wristwatch? Maybe He pulled out His mobile phone to check the time? The time that Jesus is talking about can't be read off of a screen or found on a wall calendar. This isn't the kind of time that tells you that you need to go to your next class or the kind of time that tells you that you really, really, really need to get up because you've hit the snooze button three times and you're going to miss your bus! No, this is the kind of time that's woven with hope, the kind of time that God had marked out in ages long ago, the kind of time that gives tempo to the plan of redemption—it is prophetic time.

And that prophetic clock began to tick and tock as soon as Eve and Adam ate that forbidden fruit and opened the world up to an inconceivable darkness. Right there, in the desecrated Garden of Eden, the Lord made a promise, telling Eve that her offspring would crush the enemy, Satan (Genesis 3:15). When Eve first became pregnant, she hoped the time had come, that Cain was the promised one. But the time had not yet come. And God kept the hope alive, kept making these wild promises of a child who would save the world and promises of God dwelling with humans and promises of God's kingship at last! Promises of peace and abundance and healing and neverending life.

In Abraham's day, the time had not yet come. In Moses' day, the time had not yet come. In David's day, the time had not yet come. In Isaiah's day, the time had not yet come. In Daniel's day, the time had not yet come. In Malachi's day, the time had not yet come.

But one day, the time had come. A virgin conceived, a baby was born, poor and lowly and perfect, a child grew, a man appeared, and that man Jesus started shouting out, "The time has come!" The time is fulfilled. The hope of the ages, the desire of the nations, the longing of every human heart from Eve to Mary to you—He has come. Immanuel: "God with us." Jesus, "Salvation." The time has come! The wisdom of the sages and the words of the prophets are fulfilled. The time has come! In Jesus, God fulfills every promise to humanity for His presence, for His action, for His Kingship. The rich beauty and deep goodness of the kingdom of God had, up to this point, been only promise. But now, the time had come! In Jesus, God moved from promise to fulfillment. The kingdom of God had come near.

Yes, the kingdom of God has come near. A little bit of heaven shining through to earth, the heavenly dimension breaking into our earthly realities. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near.

The Kingdom of God

When we hear Jesus announce something as remarkable as the kingdom of God, we want to know some specifics. What is this thing? What is it like? Mark doesn't give us a table of contents for this kingdom; he doesn't give us the ingredients like a recipe sheet. Masterfully, instead of telling us what the kingdom of God is, Mark writes his gospel to show us.

Let's watch what Jesus does and we'll see what the Kingdom is about.

In chapter 1, verses 16-20, Jesus calls Simon and Andrew and James and John. He begins gathering a community that, from the very outset, is focused on outreach. "'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' At once they left their nets and followed him" (Mark 1:17, 18 NIV).

In verse 20, Jesus teaches those gathered in the synagogue.

In verses 21-26, Jesus casts out a demon.

In verses 29-31, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a terrible fever.

In verses 32-34, Jesus heals the sick and demon-possessed.

In verse 35, Jesus rises up in the dark part of the morning to commune with God in prayer. Then he begins again, traveling, teaching, preaching, and healing.

In chapter 2, Jesus publicly forgives the sins of the paralytic and heals his limbs. He reaches out to a despised Jewish tax-collector and has dinner with the losers of the town. Then He reclaims the Sabbath as "made for man, not man for the Sabbath" and announces Himself as "Lord even of the Sabbath."

In chapter 3, He heals on that day, restoring to the Sabbath its healing purpose. Then He calls twelve apostles in order to send them out with the gospel and the power to overthrow demons.

In chapter 4, He teaches over and over and over again about the mystery of the Kingdom. How it is not like the kingdoms of this world, not coercive and violent. How it is meant to be shared, how it grows and operates by the power of God, how it starts small but grows big.

Then Mark starts demonstrating the power of the kingdom in major ways. First, in chapter 4, Jesus calms the storm. With just a few words, He silences the wind and masters the storm. Jesus is Lord of the natural world. Then, in chapter 5, Mark recounts how Jesus brought salvation to the lost case of the man possessed by a legion of demons. With the power of His word, He brought freedom to the lunatic and overthrew the stronghold of demonic power. Jesus is Lord of the spirit world. Then Jesus heals a woman who had been sick for more than twelve years with an incurable disease. Jesus is Lord over disease. And then—THEN!—He raises from the dead a young girl of twelve, restoring her life and restoring the joy of her parents. Jesus is Lord over death.

On and on and on it goes, the story of Jesus enacting the kingdom of God in the world. And what is it? It is community, it is outreach, it is freedom from demonic power, it is physical healing, it is sins forgiven, it is true doctrine, it is a Sabbath experience, it is liberty from fear and it is hope beyond disease and death, it is communion with God and dinner with sinners. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near. A little bit of heaven shining through to earth, the heavenly dimension breaking into our earthly realities. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near. Heaven has begun here. "The time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near."

If only we could begin to live in heaven now... And we can! Because in Jesus, heaven has begun here.

So, how can we live in heaven now? Jesus tells us that too! Mark 1:15. "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" How can we live in heaven now? Repent and believe the good news!

Living in Heaven Now

To repent is to turn around, to let go of sin as we grasp the Savior. We walk no longer in our own ways, but in the ways of the Lord. We are no longer master of our plans, but we choose Jesus as our Lord. In the light of Christ's goodness we see our badness and we cast ourselves on His mercy. We ask for repentance and He gives it to us: a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of life.

Sometimes we have the mistaken idea that we must repent before we can come to Jesus. We think, "FIRST, I must sorrow for sin and reform, THEN I will turn to Jesus and will receive His grace." But nothing could be more useless than this! Repentance does not stand between the sinner and the Savior; it is not an obstacle we must overcome before we reach Jesus. No, no! It is a gift we receive only from His hand. We must go to Jesus to receive repentance! He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). So let us come to Jesus, weary and burdened, and ask for the gift of repentance. "Make us see our sin as You see it, Jesus. Make us see the beauty of holiness as you lived it, Jesus. Make us repentant."

How do we enter into the heaven that Jesus brought near? Let's picture the kingdom of God on earth as a network of large and small outposts inside enemy territory. Inside each outpost are the most wonderful things: delicious foods, warm fellowship, healing and wellness, peace and joy. Hearing what's inside, we want to enter, of course. Eagerly we rush in, hearing the sound of laughter and rejoicing, almost tasting those almond croissants. But as we attempt to cross the threshold, we're stopped.

"What seems to be the problem? Why can't I enter?"

"Friend, before you can enter this place, you must lay down your weapons."

Repentance is the laying down of our weapons: humbling our rebel hearts before the King and giving up what we thought were our rights and receiving instead what we find to be His best gifts.

"The time has come," Jesus proclaimed. "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent! and believe the good news."

The second condition for experiencing heaven on earth is to believe the good news, to trust in the message of Jesus. Believe and trust. Sounds too simple, doesn't it? But it really is that simple! Believe and trust the message and experience heaven on earth. When we put our trust in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, we have opened the door for them to enter our lives in deep and meaningful ways. In place of loneliness, we find companionship. In place of restlessness, we find rest. In place of emptiness, we find abundance. In place of confusion, we find purpose. In place of sickness, we find healing. In place of error, we find truth. In place of selfishness, we find love. In place of despair, we find hope.

"The time has come," Jesus proclaimed. "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent! and believe the good news!" In Jesus, heaven has begun here. We let go of sin and grab on to Him because He is the *door* into heaven now and to come, He is the way of heaven now and to come, He is the *light* of heaven now and to come. In Jesus, heaven has begun here.

In *Desire of Ages*, the inspired writer Ellen White put it well: “As through Jesus we enter into rest, heaven begins here. We respond to His invitation, Come, learn of Me, and in thus coming we begin the life eternal. Heaven is a ceaseless approaching to God through Christ. The longer we are in the heaven of bliss, the more and still more of glory will be opened to us; and the more we know of God, the more intense will be our happiness. As we walk with Jesus in this life, we may be filled with His love, satisfied with His presence. All that human nature can bear, we may receive here” (331).

Amazing! For those who trust in the message of Christ, eternal life begins now. It will only get better as Jesus returns; the earth will be recreated and God will make His home here forever and we will dwell in His light. We cannot even fathom the incredible delights of eternal life in the New Jerusalem. We cannot even conceive of the wondrous excellence of life on the earth made new. The heaven of eternity will be more than our hearts can even desire! But we don’t have to wait to start enjoying the experience of heaven now. We can get a foretaste here; we can, right now, enjoy a big mouthful of heaven! Knowing Jesus, walking with Him, trusting in His message: heaven has begun here.

The Kingdom in Action

This sermon is long, but Jesus’ was short: “The time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Will you? Will you enter the Kingdom now? Will you say yes, lay down your weapons, and enter the delight of His fellowship? Jesus and I are both praying you will.

And this crazy, conflicted cosmos needs you to. This world is full of hurt, full of people in error and confusion, full of people broken by sin and weighed down with despair, full of people bound by the enemy and full of people lost in loneliness. They need you to say yes to Jesus and to become an agent for this Kingdom come near. Help them also to come into heaven begun here.

When we look at Jesus’ life, we see the Kingdom in action. It is community, it is outreach, it is freedom from demonic power, it is physical healing, it is sins forgiven,

it is true doctrine, it is a Sabbath experience, it is liberty from fear and it is hope beyond disease and death, it is communion with God and dinner with sinners.

One day, soon, what Jesus started here He will return to finish. He'll break through the sky and come with the trump of the archangel. He'll resurrect the dead, He'll bind Satan for one thousand years, He'll recreate the earth, and He'll make God's permanent home here. Listen to the words of Revelation 21:1-4:

"Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

What a joy heaven will be! What a wondrous joy!

But in the meantime, may we never ever forget that, in Jesus, heaven has begun here. Friends, won't you say yes to this promise, lay down your weapons, and enter? The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news! ●

DAY 2 | MATTHEW 11:4, 5; PHILLIPPIANS 3:4-8

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Fable, Fairytale, or Reality

by Padraic “Paddy” McCoy

Did you know that at the end of April 2011, one of the biggest events in history occurred? In fact, it is a moment that I’m sure everyone in the world well remembers. It was one of those moments that we’ll be talking about twenty years from now with the phrase, “Do you remember where you were when...?”

What was that event? It was the day when one Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, was joined in holy matrimony to one Catherine Elizabeth Middleton. The royal wedding was the most watched event in history, like the wedding of William’s father before him, back in the 1980’s. According to statistics, the royal wedding was watched by nearly 2.5 billion people, approximately 35 percent of the world’s population; that’s one out of every three people on the planet.



Padraic “Paddy” McCoy
is the author of this sermon.
He can be reached at paddy@the1project.org.

Created for a Kingdom

As an observer of life I am forced to ask, what was it about this event that drew the attention of so many? As I thought about this over several weeks, the conclusion that I’ve come to is that we as a human race desire to live in the pages of our own fairytale. We have written inside of us, maybe on our DNA, this hunger to be a part of another story. We all, at one point or another, have longed to live as a part of these fantastical stories. C.S. Lewis once said, “If there are longings in our

hearts that nothing in this world can satisfy, it can only mean one thing. We were meant for another world.”

When we were kids, we believed in this other world, this other story, and it sounded an awful lot like a fairytale. Webster defines *fairytale*s as “stories (as for children) involving fantastic forces and beings - a story in which improbable events lead to a happy ending.”

I used to believe in all manners of fairytales: Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and even the tooth fairy. But then I grew up and I don’t believe in those fairytales anymore. I know better now. I’m educated. Two degrees on my office wall and years of experience under my belt tell me that fairytales are simply too good to be true. No one lives happily ever after—fifteen minutes watching the news will tell you that—famine, disease, sex trafficking, natural disasters, terrorism, divorce. The world is a pretty awful place, and the fairytales of my youth have all but faded away.

But interestingly enough, I do read Bible stories to my kids. I don’t want them to miss out on dreaming real dreams and learning about real heroes. Yet, as I read these stories to them, I find my mind drifting, longing, hoping, and even fearing. I find myself hoping that life was guaranteed to end with everyone living happily ever after. But I also find myself fearing that perhaps my children will stop believing.

A Tale of Two Stories

I am going to tell two stories. The first is about the reality of this world—the life we face every day—the life of the seemingly mundane, the incredibly stressed, the constant disappointments, and the painful predicaments that fill our days. But then there’s this other possibility, this other story, maybe even another reality—one that may seem, for all intents and purposes, like a fairytale, but one worth believing in because it is true. My hope, my wish, my prayer is that through the telling of these two stories your eyes will be opened and you will choose to live out the other story, what we will call the “Kingdom Tale.”

It happens to all of us eventually, the day fairytales died. Something happened to steal them away from us: our parent's divorce, a friend dies, a well-meaning teacher tells us we can't actually make money as an artist. Maybe we're diagnosed with depression or some other mental health challenge. Or maybe we just simply "grow-up" and get an education. Whatever it is, it happens for almost everyone. And as far as I can tell, we respond to this great loss by buckling down and trying our best to make the most of this life. We trade the castles and horses of the past for sports cars and a nice corner office with a home in the country. We seek out degrees to make us feel important, we buy grown-up toys to help us forget about the emptiness. Some hit the bar to numb their souls or seek after meaningless relationships, real and/or virtually—to at least achieve the illusion of intimacy. Or maybe we throw ourselves into religion and seek the "perfect" life, or at least the appearance thereof. We go for the perfect spouse complete with 2.5 children. We are tricked into believing that if we just try hard enough, act good enough, and work long enough, meaning in life will follow.

In a study done in 2012 by the Institute of Higher Education, they found that 78.1 percent of first-time college freshmen viewed being "well-off financially" as the most important thing in life.

Now, being well off financially and owning things, in and of themselves, is not what's wrong. WE are what's wrong. We've stopped believing in the Kingdom tale and so we've gotten off track of what's most important in life. We search for meaning in places devoid of meaning. We ask important questions like, "*Who am I? What is my purpose? And what is the meaning of life?*" But the answers we find in this world's reality still leave us empty. I mean, what if we obtain everything we ever dreamed of only to realize that the path leads nowhere?

Tom Brady, NFL Quarterback for the New England Patriots, one of the highest paid players in football, once said in an interview, "Why do I have three super bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say 'Hey man, this is what it's all about.' I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, 'It's got to be more than this.' I mean this isn't – this can't be – all it's cracked up to be" (CBS TV interview).

Actor Brad Pitt responded to the question of having achieved the American dream by saying, "I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us – the car, the condo, our version of success – but if that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this – we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a deadend, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that" (*Rolling Stone* magazine).

Well, what if the reality that we can see with our eyes, the famines, the diseases, the meaninglessness, the pain...what if it isn't the *real* story? What if the life so many are living is simply a fable...a falsehood, a lie, a result of the curse? What if the answer to our search for meaning depended on our ability to believe in the Kingdom tale?

In order to explore this other reality, this other kingdom, we have to go to an ancient book. It is, to say the least, one of the most controversial books ever written. Some, in fact, *would* label it a fairytale: full of "out of this world stories" and far-fetched teachings. Some would say they are simply too smart and too educated to believe in such ridiculous ideas. Nineteenth-century agnostic, Robert Ingersoll, once said this book was "a fable, an obscenity, a humbug, a sham and a lie." Famous actor Sir Ian McKellan said, "I've always thought [this book] should come with a disclaimer at the beginning announcing to the reader that it is fiction, not fact." But truth be told, hundreds of thousands have died to make sure this book, and its stories, have been passed on from generation to generation for thousands of years. No other book has been so carefully preserved and so tediously reproduced. And to many around the world, this book is believed to be much more than a fairytale. Instead, it holds the secrets to the meaning of life.

I'll give you the really condensed version of the story.

Once upon a time, in a land of darkness, a Creator full of love to share came and created light and life. He spoke the world into existence. He then created His most beloved creation; in His own image He created them, male and female, and

He gave them a most amazing, albeit risky, gift. He gave them the gift of freewill: the ability to make their own choices and to choose to either follow the Creator, or reject Him. It was the only way they could love Him freely. Things were great and life was full of love and purpose and meaning, until a talking serpent entered the scene. He lied to the creation and caused them to question the Creator's intentions. They began to doubt in the goodness of the Creator, and so they bit the fruit, sweet on the outside but bitter on the inside, and brought a curse upon themselves and this world. The curse brought with it pain, toil, hardships, disease, rejection, and death. Lost was the ability to commune with the Creator in the garden in the cool of the day. Lost was paradise. Much happened along the way, but the Creator never abandoned His creation; never. His love for them wouldn't allow it. In fact, the Creator eventually did something even more amazing than that first gift of freewill. At just the right time, while the creations were still powerless to save themselves from the curse, the Creator came down to this planet and became one of His creation. He gave up paradise, sacrificed His own life, to enter the world of the curse in order to introduce us to a new story.

“When God gave His Son to our world, He endowed human beings with imperishable riches—riches compared with which the treasured wealth of men since the world began is nothingness. Christ came to the earth and stood before the children of men with the hoarded love of eternity, and this is the treasure that, through our connection with Him, we are to receive, to reveal, and to impart” (*God's Amazing Grace*, 16.6).

The four Gospels, along with modern scholars, all seem to agree that Jesus' central theme in all His teaching was to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God, a new reality. This kingdom is mentioned more than 120 times in the New Testament, mostly by Jesus Himself. Jesus talked about three kingdoms; the first was the kingdom of this world; the second was the kingdom that is at hand, near, in our midst; and the third is the kingdom that is to come. We've already talked about the kingdom of this world and what it has to offer, and in order to cut to the chase, we'll talk about the kingdom that is already here, for it is a taste of the kingdom that is to come.

What is this kingdom? Well, first of all, it's not what you'd expect. It never is. You see, God likes to show up in ways that you'd never expect: a burning bush, a whisper, a talking donkey, a boy with a sling, a baby in a manger, a carpenter, a cross. God loves surprises. And so in order to be open to this kingdom reality, a change must first occur. We must, as Jesus said, repent.

The True Kingdom Reality

Jesus began His ministry with the words, “**Repent** for the kingdom of heaven, or God, is at hand.” Some of us have heard that the word *repent* means to turn or change, and we associate it with a turning from our sin. If we sin, we need to repent or turn away from it. This is true, but the word for *repent* in Greek is the word, *metanoēō* and, like many Greek words, *it has multiple meanings*. *Metanoēō* can also mean to think differently. In other words, Jesus is announcing that it's time to begin thinking differently because the kingdom of God is here.

Repentance is associated with faith and is urged in the gospel as essential to salvation. Paul preached repentance. He said, “I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20, 21). “There is no salvation without repentance” (Ellen G. White: *Selected Messages, Vol. 1*, page 365.2).

It's a powerful idea, thinking differently. In fact, one company used this slogan to turn its business from a struggling company on the verge of bankruptcy, to one of the most successful companies of all time and the only company in the world market that hasn't lost value during the recession. That company? Apple.

So to be open to the reality of the kingdom of God, we need to think differently, but how? Think how? Fortunately, Jesus gave us that answer too. Surrounded by a group of educated men and honestly seeking disciples, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Why must we become like children? I mean, haven't we spent a lot

of time and money growing up and leaving our childish ways behind us? Might I suggest that the reason Jesus says we need to become like children has to do with a child's ability to dream and imagine and believe in the impossible; to believe that fairytales actually do exist.

So let's take that framework, the challenge to think differently, as a child, about the kingdom of God reality. Let's explore how Jesus describes what this kingdom is.

The clearest description of the kingdom of God was given by Jesus in response to the disciples of John the Baptist while their teacher sat in prison. Even John the Baptist, the one who came to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, the one who identified Jesus as the Messiah, the one who heard the voice of God declare that Jesus was God's Son, was stuck in this other reality. After all, if the Messiah had come to establish His kingdom, then why was John rotting behind bars?

Jesus responded to John's doubts by telling him about the kinds of things that happen in the kingdom. (Read Matthew 11: 4-5.)

Jesus goes on, throughout the Gospels, to explain the kingdom as a place where the broken are made whole; where the worst of sinners are let in first; a place that invades every aspect of our lives and can actually bring out the good in us; a place so amazing that when we discover it we'd give up everything we have to keep it. It is a place that is open to everyone who would accept it. It is a kingdom that is not measured by the letters behind your name or the number of commas in your bank account or the depth of your dimples, but by the way in which you are loved and love others. It is a generous kingdom, a grace-filled kingdom, a purpose-giving kingdom, a hope-drenched kingdom, a love-driven kingdom, and it is available for us to enter into right here and right now. Don't miss it.

"Remember that Christ risked all; "tempted like as we are," he staked even his own eternal existence upon the issue of the conflict. Heaven itself was imperiled for our redemption. At the foot of the cross, remembering that for one sinner Jesus would have yielded up his life, we may estimate the value of a soul." (GCB - The General Conference Bulletin, December 1, 1895 par. 22)

Jesus risked everything to come and give us a new story. A third-century theologian, Origen, described the kingdom of God by saying that Jesus is the *auto basilia*; which means that Jesus Himself is the kingdom of God. Wherever the presence of Jesus is on this earth, the curse from the Garden of Eden begins to be reversed. The deaf can hear, the blind can see, the lame can walk, the dead are raised, the hopeless find hope, the lost find direction, and worthless-no-good sinners like me realize that we are actually worth more to God than we could ever possibly imagine.



Make
it real and personal.
Share a story from
your own life.

PERSONAL STORY: A few years ago, I faced a storm of anxiety that ruled my life for many months. In the midst of that storm, I had created an alternate reality, another story, than the one Jesus was trying to give me. In my telling of the story, I was certain to fail. One morning, my beloved wife came into the room as I was curled up, resting on a tear-soaked pillow, and she bravely took me by the hand and led me from the fable of my own making to the fairytale of the kingdom of God. She told me, as if God was the one giving me the message, how much I was loved and how the Father had never left me and never would. She painted pictures of a kingdom reality where the only thing that mattered was that I was loved and the One who loved me called me and would be with me always. I couldn't see that story on my own. With her help, I began to see that reality over the next several months. I've slowly begun walking out of the kingdom of this world and the makings of my own story and I've started living in the kingdom of God and the story He came and lived and died to give me. 1 Corinthians 2:9 says, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (English Standard Version). So I am beginning to see with new eyes, hear with new ears, and there are some occasions where you might even see me leaping. But to begin accepting this version of the story and to walk out of the fable and into the really true "fairytale," I had to think differently, more like a child, so I could once again believe in the impossible.

The apostle Paul learned to live in this kingdom. Before Jesus blinded him on the road to Damascus, Paul had it all: esteem, power, wealth, influence, education. He was high up in the kingdom of this world. But after Jesus, Paul would come to

write this: “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything [the money, the fame, the education, the power, the position, the good times...all of it] as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him” (Philippians 3:7-8).

The Message says it a bit more emphatically: “Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I’ve dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him.”

Learning to Live in the Kingdom

Paul learned that the things of this world, minus Jesus, are meaningless. He learned that the most important thing is to know Jesus Christ and that everything else, without Jesus, is garbage. Education, wealth, power, comfort, and the American dream...it’s all meaningless without knowing Jesus. It was this belief that allowed Paul to sing God’s praises in prison, to write letters of joy and encouragement while rotting in chains, and to go to his death singing hymns of praise because the reality that he lived in was not of this world. Paul’s reality was the kingdom of God and nothing and no one could take that away from him. They could strip him of his clothes, but they could never touch his title as a son of the living God. They could beat him senseless with sticks made of wood, but they could never extinguish the fire in his eyes. They could spit on his face, but the only way to stop him from proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God was to take his life, which he gladly gave up to be with Jesus.

And so with that kind of passion the good news of the kingdom of God spread like wildfire in the ancient world. Merchants and slaves, young people and old people, the sick, the poor, the diseased, and the outcasts accepted the good news and shouted it from mountaintops and the street corners. It grew from twelve believers to millions of believers in what seemed like moments in the pages of history.

What drew so many people so quickly? It was the story that is simply so good it just has to be true, the story that tops all stories, the place where the curse is reversed: the story of the kingdom of God. It was this story that allowed hundreds of thousands of followers in the early church to go bravely to their death because they couldn't imagine going back to the confines of their previous story. They believed in and knew the "fairytale" was the only true story and they were willing to die for the truth.

Do you have something in your life worth living for? Worth dying for? Might I suggest a new reality? The kingdom of the living God. It is no fable; it is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, and its Leader extends His nail-scarred hand to you tonight, asking you, begging you, to believe.

Fable or fairytale? The choice is yours. ●

DAY 3 | LUKE 4

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Transforming Our World

by Timothy Gillespie

The San Diego fireworks show in California, USA is among the most impressive in the world and attracts thousands of people. Last year's show has been described, from all accounts, as epic. I have seen video of it; if you haven't, you should check it out. It was, apparently, a computer glitch that sent three of the four barges filled with fireworks to blow up their cargo in a span of about nine seconds. The video is stunning; three barges with all of their fireworks going up at once.

Waiting for the Something

I suppose the thing that is more interesting to me than the fireworks explosions was the fact that the crowds hung around for 35-45 minutes until a voice came over a loudspeaker and basically said, "Um, that's it folks, sorry."

People were waiting for more. They were waiting for the purple shimmering fireworks that turn to white and silver. They were waiting for the red, white, and blue fireworks that would make them remember their childhood—and create childhood memories for their kids. They were waiting for the finale.

You know how it is when you are younger—you keep asking whether or not that was the finale, and your parent would answer, "not yet, just wait." And you



Timothy Gillespie is the author of this sermon. He can be reached at tim@the1project.org.

couldn't wait! You just wanted to see the finale. When it came, you knew. When it showed up, you were aware that this was different, this was worthwhile, this was what you had been waiting for.

But for those poor people in San Diego, they experienced the beginning, middle, and end of a fireworks experience—in nine short seconds! And then they were left waiting for a finale that would never come. They were just left waiting, expectantly, for an end.

The press covered the story with words like, “disappointed” and “bored” in the waiting for the finale that had already happened.

It's a shame really, that they couldn't have used that time for something else. The aggregate of all those minutes and seconds from all of those people could have literally changed the world if they had been put to good use. But they were just waiting for the finale.

We just recently returned from the Northern New England Camp Meeting; a great place, with great people. It was a great experience; four wonderful people were baptized in the Youth and Young Adult division, and we got to hang out in one of the earliest places of history for our denomination. It was great and I am grateful for the opportunity!

As we got to the airport in Boston, we learned something heart-wrenching: Our plane had been delayed! Now, this would not probably bother most people, but I have three children, and their various devices were about out of battery power. Bad times indeed. The boys kept getting in trouble. They kept getting into everything around them. They were not at all doing well; and, by the virtue of *that* fact, neither was I!

It seemed as if we would never leave. For every five minutes that the plane was delayed, it felt like another hour we had to wait. They boys were in trouble, they were bored, I was mad, and so was my wife.

The point is this; when you are just waiting around, it not only makes the time pass slowly, but it also leaves you a lot of time to get in trouble.

A Great Disappointment

Why do I say all of this? Because we are a people who have experienced a great disappointment. However, our hearts are still longing for this blessed hope that burns within our hearts; hope in the coming of the Lord. And in the time of waiting we are keeping our robes clean, as best we can.

Some of us have this idea that the reason that Jesus came was simply to save us from our sins and, when the time is right, take us to heaven. However, let's look at the words of Jesus and see what He believed was the reason for His coming:

"He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me **to proclaim good news to the poor.**

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"** (Luke 4:16-21, emphasis added).

What was Jesus saying? Was it possible that He was saying that justice, peace, and righteousness were about to be established forever?

His answer: YES!

Breaking Down the Text

And we know that with Jesus we don't see a way around the very bold statement that He makes. There are no loopholes, no sidestepping. If you are like me, you like to make a solid argument, and then make sure you have given yourself an out, a loophole, a small back door so that if someone else has a better argument, then there is always a way to "save face."

Jesus, however, left no such room. The time of justice, peace, and reconciliation was now upon us, as He had ushered it in with His life, death, and resurrection. It was clear that it was not simply or only for saving us personally, but also to declare the good news to the poor.

But let's stop for one moment, and ask the question: "What is good news for the poor?" Is good news for the poor that once you leave this wretched life the next thing you will see is Jesus Christ and journey to heaven?

Absolutely! That will always be good news, for the rich, poor, ultra poor, ultra rich, and the middle class as well. Do you know what else is good news to the poor? Food, clothing, drink, shelter. These things create in us the ability to continue on.

Sometimes, good news is what can immediately alleviate a situation. Is our good news to the poor something that changes their station in life? Helps them live life in the current kingdom of God? Is our good news only the news of the future, or is it good news for today as well?

The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses--extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Saviour attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments. Not because He was indifferent to the woes of men, but because the remedy did not lie in merely human and external measures. To be efficient, the cure must reach men individually, and must regenerate the heart (Ellen G. White: *God's Amazing Grace*, page 16.2).

Does our good news only take the form of a tract or a book, or does it take the form of clothing or bread? Because I know what I need when I'm hungry—and I mean when I am physically hungry—so do you.

By kneeling down with bowl and towel, Jesus redefined greatness.

By proclaiming the good news, and then making it practical, He reclaimed the good news for the present kingdom of God. And we needed this redefinition desperately. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). The children of Israel had become a poor preview of the coming kingdom of God.

On television and in media, we make choices based on the previews that we see for a show, a series, or a media event. By going to Apple trailers you can see what is on the horizon and what is currently happening in media experience and productions. But sometimes, the previews of what we see make us completely uninterested in spending our time watching whatever is offered.

There are other times when the converse is true, when the preview far exceeds the experience. We watch a preview on television for a new series and the two minutes we see makes us want the experience. Then, when we watch it, we realize that there were only two minutes worth watching anyway.

Up until Jesus had come, the preview for the kingdom of God was pretty poor. The children of Israel had not given the world an expression of the character of God that many were interested in. The trailer wasn't making anyone want to see the movie. For how they defined greatness was by the mere fact that they were the chosen people along with the "Law," their tradition and heritage. Poverty and affliction were signs of divine disapproval; this was hardly good news for the poor and afflicted; the law wasn't even good news to those who were striving to keep it without recourse to the Savior, because the law convicts and points out sin.

So here we have a world desperately in need of good news, and we have a Jesus who ushers in that good news in more than simple words. The good news of Jesus went beyond theological argument and became particular. It became enfleshed.

The good news had skin on it, and had bread in it, and clothing, and drink. The good news became physical healing and the good news became a community that told everything, shared everything, and made sure no one who was around would be hungry, cold, or afflicted if at all possible.

The good news of heaven became the good news today, in their lives, in their everyday, waking up and walking around lives. It was not merely projected to the realm of “someday soon”; it was TODAY. Today was the day that the good news of justice, peace, sight, and freedom were proclaimed. “Someday soon,” we will experience the culmination of all our hopes and dreams in the establishment of the glorious and eternal kingdom of God; heaven starts in the here and now.

The King and the Kingdom

I start to get excited, because when the good news is real and present you can't help but be excited. I think it was one of the reasons that the disciples didn't fast when they were around Jesus. They knew that there was too much good news to be stoic any longer.

But this good news was hard for the good, churchy folk to stomach. It was too much and seemed too foreign. It was too inclusive and meant that they had to love the unlovable.

You see, at this point, God was tired of righteous acts. Their assemblies had become pageants and their worship was something that God was awfully tired of consuming. This had happened before—let's read in Isaiah 1:10-17 (despite appearances, he's speaking to Jerusalem!):

“Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

"The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the LORD.

"I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals;

I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?

Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.

New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.

Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong.

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."

And again in Isaiah 58:1-10:

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?

Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and **if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed**, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

This is God calling good church people out! He wanted more than their pageants, their offerings, their songs, and their worship. He wanted their lives to reflect His love tangibly, with skin, with compassion, in real and powerful ways.

LOVE MORE, is always the cry of the LORD to His people.

He’s not pretending anymore. We see in 1 John 3:16-18 the function of the church:

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. **If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.**”

It is always hard when Jesus defines something, because He defines it in such a different way. We often think we know what Jesus was going to say. But He rarely said what people thought He would say.

Basically, Jesus was saying that following Christ was to be **downwardly mobile in an upwardly mobile world.**

The good news means a new set of values, a new trajectory, a new focus, a new orientation, and a new lifestyle. The good news of the tangible kingdom of God is not a spiritual discipline that we practice, but a new way of orienting one’s entire life.

As an orienteering illustration, think about finding one’s compass points in life. When you surf, you do this with a point on the shore; sailing, a point on the horizon; orienteering, a point on the map. What is your orientation point when it comes to your faith journey?

It is important that your point of reference, when it comes to the kingdom of God, be tangible. It needs to be something with skin on it. This is why Christian service, or the ability to serve one another without thought of any return, is so paramount to a healthy life of faith in the kingdom of God. To ignore the greater works of compassion is to literally lose our way; it is to see the kingdom of God like that fireworks show, where it all happens in the first nine seconds, and now you are just waiting for the finale. It's to be bored in the kingdom of God, and that makes no sense!

The good news means that we are to believe that there is a kingdom and that that kingdom has a king.

Let me explain what I mean:

For many Christians, there seems to be this misconception that the journey of Jesus to earth was to simply save us. But, as we saw in the texts already quoted, He came for more than simply spiritual salvation, but to create a new economy based on kingdom of God principles. Ellen White describes the launching of Jesus' earthly ministry recorded in Luke 4:18-21 as follows:

He (Jesus) stood before the people as a living expositor of the prophecies concerning Himself. Explaining the words He had read, He spoke of the Messiah as a reliever of the oppressed, a liberator of captives, a healer of the afflicted, restoring sight to the blind, and revealing to the world the light of truth. His impressive manner and the wonderful import of His words thrilled the hearers with a power they had never felt before. The tide of divine influence broke every barrier down; like Moses, they beheld the Invisible. As their hearts were moved upon by the Holy Spirit, they responded with fervent amens and praises to the Lord. (DA 237.2)

And over the years, too often communities have lost this sense of mission, and have fallen into an expression of Jesus that is based on intellectual beliefs, rather than compassion. But the kingdom of God is a kingdom of compassion. It has always been and always will be.

James says it clearly: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (1:27).

A kingdom of compassion is what we are asked to live in—and to express. To do this means we must embrace the kingdom economy, the kingdom way of life, and this is a beautiful thing.

There are many who believe in kingdom compassion and work actively in it; however, many of them refuse to acknowledge that this kingdom has a king. And this is where Christianity has the opportunity to be more than simply a good way to live, or a system of compassion to the world.

At our best, we believe in the kingdom and acknowledge and worship its king.

However, too often the case becomes that Christians begin their faith journey by acknowledging the King, but refuse to participate in His kingdom. They have accepted the explosion of grace in their lives, but are never able to make their faith tangible. They have accepted Jesus as a Savior, but deny Him as Lord. They are baptized in water for the cleansing of past sins, dying to their past life, but are not resurrected through the power of the Holy Spirit into the new kingdom life in Christ.

Accepting Jesus as Savior and denying Him as Lord leaves many believers with nothing to do, nowhere to go, and they take their time fixing other people's sins in the church.

Oh, if we could only put that energy into being the tangible hands of Christ in the world.

One of the most powerful ways to overcome a religion that is relegated to the philosophical is to get involved in a religion that is tangible.

Two stories illustrate this point well.

I read an email story this week about a group of salesmen who attended a convention out-of-town some years back. As they rushed through the terminal to get to their departing flight, one of them accidentally knocked over a table that held a display of apples.

They continued running for their plane as apples flew everywhere and rolled along the ground. They made it just in time to get on their plane. One of them felt a

twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand they had knocked over, and told his buddies to go on without him and to tell his wife he would be taking a later flight.

Then he returned to the terminal where the apples were all over the terminal floor. He was glad he did. The 16-year-old girl was totally blind! She was crying, tears running down her cheeks in frustration, and at the same time helplessly groping for her spilled produce as the crowd swirled about her, no one stopping and no one caring for her plight.

The salesman knelt on the floor with her, gathered up the apples, put them back on the table and helped organize her display. As he did this, he noticed that many of the apples had become battered and bruised, so he put those aside in another basket. When he had finished, he pulled out his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this \$40 for the damage we did. Are you okay?"

The girl nodded through her tears. He continued on, "I hope we didn't spoil your day too badly." As the salesman started to walk away, the bewildered blind girl called out to him, "Mister..."

He paused and turned to look back into those blind eyes.

"Are you Jesus?" she said.

He stopped in mid-stride and he wondered. Then slowly he made his way to the later flight with that question burning in his soul: "Are you Jesus?"

Another story

Abraham Lincoln went to a slave market one time, and was moved with compassion to place a bid on a young black girl. He won the bid and walked away with his "property." There was a sullen, angry expression on the girl's face, because she knew that here was another white man who had bought her and would abuse her. As they walked away from the slave block, however, Lincoln told the girl, "You are free."

"What does that mean?" she demanded.

"It means, you are free."

"Does that mean that I can be what I want to be?"

"Yes--you can be whatever you want to be."

"Does that mean that I can say what I want to say?"

"Yes--you can say whatever you want to say."

"Does that mean that I can go where I want to go?"

"Yes--you can go wherever you want to go."

"Then ..." said the girl, "I'll go with you."

I read this second story to illustrate a further point. When you meet Jesus, you stay with Jesus.

We have too often thought that our **orthodoxy** (our right belief) was somehow living in the kingdom of God. But we have, too often, forgotten that our **orthopraxy** (our right action) is what we do in the kingdom of God.

Has our faith become like that of those people in San Diego, waiting for the finale, bored, disappointed, and without movement—waiting for the Second Coming without thought to those around us who are hurting?

For Seventh-day Adventists, there is a King, and He has a kingdom.

It is not the church's job to do the service for you, but to facilitate opportunities for you to get involved.

Regardless of your passion, your church should help you live it!

Ministering in your passion is a huge part of living in the kingdom of God.

The worship service should be a time to come and celebrate the God moments that we have had as we witness and serve the greater community.

But for far too long, church attendance has been the spiritual high point of our week; great words are spoken, great music leads to the presence of God, but often there is too little or no time to express our gratitude for what God has been leading us to discover and do in our kingdom living all week, all month, all year, every second of every day.

But if we sit and do nothing, God will grow weary of our assemblies.

Unamuno, the Spanish philosopher, tells about the Roman aqueduct at Segovia, in his native Spain. It was built in A.D. 109. For eighteen hundred years, it carried cool water from the mountains to the hot and thirsty city. Nearly sixty generations of men drank from its flow. Then came another generation, a recent one, who said, "This aqueduct is so great a marvel that it ought to be preserved for our children, as a museum piece. We shall relieve it of its centuries-long labor."

They did; they laid modern iron pipes. They gave the ancient bricks and mortar a reverent rest. And the aqueduct began to fall apart. The sun beating on the dry mortar caused it to crumble. The bricks and stone sagged and threatened to fall. What ages of service could not destroy, idleness disintegrated.

And this is what can become of a church that does not invest in the service of others.

"The great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa -- the city of his birth -- but only on the condition that the instrument never be played upon. It was an unfortunate condition, for it is a peculiarity of wood that as long as it is used and handled, it shows little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm-eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. The moldering instrument is a reminder that a life withdrawn from all service to others loses its meaning" (*Bits & Pieces*, June 25, 1992).

So this is the truth: there is a kingdom, and that kingdom does have a King. And that King, in Luke 4, made it very clear what He was about. It makes sense that we be about the things that Jesus was about: mercy, justice, compassion, favor, and healing. If our faith communities show these characteristics, they will not only be full—they will be overflowing. ●



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DAY 4 | MATTHEW 5:1-16

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Counter Culture Values

by Alex Bryan

The Kingdom of Heaven is Significant

The kingdom of heaven was—and is—a very important subject for Jesus.

In fact, some say while on earth He spoke of the kingdom of heaven more than any other topic. The kingdom, apparently, was the *most* important reality. Jesus told many parables about the kingdom (Matthew 13). He contrasted the kingdom of heaven (His Father’s kingdom) with inferior kingdoms of this world (Matthew 4:8-10). He even described His mission as bringing the kingdom of heaven to the earth itself (Matthew 4:17). The prayer of Jesus, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10) shows us that God wishes for the ways and means of His kingdom to conquer the ways and means of the kingdoms of this world.



Alex Bryan is the author of this sermon. He can be reached at alex@the1project.org.

The kingdom of heaven was—and is—a very important subject for Jesus.

A kingdom, of course, has a king. God is the king of His kingdom – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are on the throne. They are in charge. They make the rules. The life of Jesus describes what the kingdom is all about. We find in His life compassion, holiness, purpose, truth, and love. We see in His interactions with people how kingdom people are supposed to live. From His miracles of healing to His

practical teachings about money to His sacrificial death on a cross we understand the values of the kingdom. Jesus came to reveal God, to show us how God wants the world to work. Christ brings us “the law of the land,” which is, of course, built upon the law of love (Matthew 22:37).

Our purpose here, however, is not to identify the king, nor the kingdom’s rules and regulations. Instead, we will explore kingdom citizenship. Who gets to be a part of this kingdom? In an attempt to answer this question we will explore Matthew 5:1-14, which is the beginning of Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount.” You may know that this teaching is the great discourse on ethical living in the way of Jesus – life lived in harmony with the kingdom of God. But in these first several verses, Jesus first wishes to explore the question of “who” actually qualifies for kingdom membership.

Qualifications for Kingdom Membership

Let’s begin reading in Matthew 5:1-2.

“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.”

A quick and casual reading of these verses might leave us feeling as if there isn’t much to reflect upon other than some basic, uninteresting facts. “Jesus was teaching people on the side of a hill.” But there is much more to the story! Yes, Jesus is teaching. He was a rabbi, a teacher. And yes, the fact that He sat down was a common teaching position for rabbis. And yes, the word *disciple* means “one who is learning from a rabbi,” and the great outdoors was a common place to teach and a natural slope would have made for a nice classroom environment. All this makes sense. What doesn’t is this: Jesus was teaching the *crowds*.

Here’s the problem: rabbis were traditionally very selective about who they would teach. Only the best and the brightest entered their classrooms. Only the politically well-connected found a chair in their amphitheaters. Only those who were holy, righteous, of the right bloodline, only those who were Jewish, and only the boys were allowed to enroll in their schools. If you were female, you would not be taught. If you were the son of a poor man, you would not be taught. If you were

diseased, you would not be taught. If you were a Gentile you would definitely not be taught. If you did not meet a very select standard, you were simply out of luck.

Jesus is teaching the *crowds*. Jesus is treating the masses as those *worthy* of being taught. There is no “mettle” detector, testing the spiritual worthiness of those who would listen. This crowd is diverse: rich, poor, male, female, young, old, high IQ, low IQ, those who knew the doctrines and those who knew nothing of them. Jesus’ decision to teach the crowds—come one and all—presents a startling new vision of kingdom membership. The gates protecting the gated community are being torn down. The idea that only a few are God’s chosen—His select special ones—is eroding. This idea is now challenged by Jesus.

So what kind of people does Jesus see on that hillside?

Verse 3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Have you ever been “poor in spirit”? Has your spirit ever been low? Have you ever felt down and depressed? Has the darkness ever surrounded you and you felt completely hopeless? Have you ever doubted that life is good? Have you ever wondered, “God, do you exist”? Have you ever felt empty, impoverished in your spirit, in your soul?

Jesus says, “blessed are you.” What does He mean? You are chosen by God. God is smiling on you. God loves you. God is happy with you. Be of good courage. You can have a kind of joy even amid great sorrow. Just because you are “in the dumps” doesn’t mean you are somehow cut off from God.

We live in a world where mental illness is sometimes viewed with suspicion. Even today we may look down on those who need counseling, who need to speak with a mental health professional. We sometimes assume depression means, “This person is not right with God, with life.” We say of someone who is uncertain in their ability to believe in God, “They are agnostic, an atheist, a doubter . . . they are in real trouble with God.” Sometimes we associate bad moods and mental darkness with unfitness for the kingdom. But we forget even Jesus’ words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Even Jesus, who remained without sin, felt great darkness. Even Jesus wondered whether God had abandoned him. Such an extreme experience would have led any of us to doubt, and even reject, the reality of God. However, Jesus’ experience shows us that extreme

human experience is no evidence for the absence of God. We can be poor in spirit; we can live with troubled souls at times.

But this does not leave us cursed! Rather, we are blessed. We are beloved. We are invited to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven, of the kingdom of Jesus. If you are feeling low today, remember, you are blessed, you are beloved.

Jesus looks out at the crowd again (verse 4): “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Grief is not sin. Even Jesus wept with the family of Lazarus (John 11:35).

“But it was not only because of His human sympathy with Mary and Martha that Jesus wept. In His tears there was a sorrow as high above human sorrow as the heavens are higher than the earth. Christ did not weep for Lazarus; for He was about to call him from the grave. He wept because many of those now mourning for Lazarus would soon plan the death of Him who was the resurrection and the life. But how unable were the unbelieving Jews rightly to interpret His tears! Some, who could see nothing more than the outward circumstances of the scene before Him as a cause for His grief, said softly, “Behold how He loved him!” Others, seeking to drop the seed of unbelief into the hearts of those present, said derisively, “Could not this Man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?” If it were in Christ’s power to save Lazarus, why then did He suffer him to die?” (*Desire of Ages*, 533.4)

Kingdom membership does not require perpetual happiness. We may be sad and still be in sync with the Savior. We may mourn—even with overtones of anger. Grief includes anger—anger with ourselves, with circumstances, with other human beings, even anger with God. Strong emotions in connection with disappointment and loss are not necessarily contrary to following Jesus. Faithfulness to God does not mean elimination of human feelings. Are you suffering? You are not cursed. Believe that you are blessed, that you are beloved by God.

Jesus continues (verse 5): “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Our world does not admire the meek. Weakness is perceived as a flaw. We admire those who are strong financially, strong athletically, strong in terms of the media's narrow definition of beauty. We like outgoing people. We like self-confident people. We like those with a quick wit. Those who are slow, ugly, poor, or dull . . . we aren't big fans of these unfortunate ones. And, of course, these distorted values can often be found in the church. We love strong preachers, strong leaders, strong Christian men and women who have their act together. But the meek? The weak? Those who live so often in the cracks and crevices of life? But here comes Jesus, and He says it's not the engaging evangelist and the wealthy donor and the perfect-pitched soprano who alone have access to the kingdom of heaven: "Blessed are the meek."

And then Jesus looks again out at the crowd (verse 6): "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Wow. In the Christian community we celebrate those who are well-fed in righteousness. We love holy men and righteous women. We love prayer-warriors and Bible study champions. We love those who tithe to the penny and don't eat cheese. Those who are well-nourished—the remnant of the remnant of the remnant—these are the true children of God! But here Jesus proclaims a blessing, a word of God's favor, to those who are hungry and thirsty. Jesus is pointing to those who have not been taking their holy vitamins and consuming three square meals of Godliness every day. Jesus says, "Welcome to the kingdom those of you who are spiritually starving. There is room enough for those who are not super-saints."

And Jesus continues (verses 7-9): "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Mercy implies not seeking justice when justice is deserved. It is grace. Purity of heart does not imply perfection, but rather honest confession and transparency—a pure-hearted person admits fault, claims God's gift of grace, and longs to be like Jesus. And peacemakers? Those who seek peace are less interested in getting what is fair and more interested in working for the common good—a community of grace. These three qualities may be attractive to us. But too often we admire the opposite in religion: we like those who discipline the fallen, we like those who maintain a veneer

of holiness, we like those who conquer. Mercy, heart-purity, and peacemaking often get left out in the cold. But Jesus says to His crowd of disciples, “Bring them inside, into the warmth of the living room of your life.”

And then Jesus says this (verses 10-12): “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Jesus tells the men and women seated on that hillside to be aware. Joining the kingdom will not be easy. You will be persecuted. You will be mocked. You will be tortured. You might even be killed. Kingdom living is not a life enjoyed behind protective walls. Citizenship in the community of Jesus has a cost. We will be persecuted like the prophets of old. And who did this persecuting? Yes, at times, secular, profane, evil forces—like Pharaoh, Ahab, and Nebuchadnezzar. But the prophets were also persecuted by those claiming to do the work of God. In Matthew 21:33-46 Jesus tells a parable illustrating the long history of persecution—at the hands of religious leadership. And at the end of the parable the chief priests and the Pharisees realize that Jesus has been “talking about them.” How ironic! The people who would claim privileged status in God’s kingdom are the ones warring against that very kingdom. It is a sobering thought that those who presented themselves as most holy, most righteous, most religious, most serious about cleaning up the synagogue, and making it pure—it was those religious leaders who were doing the most damage to the church. Their hearts were not pure. They would bind burdens on others but not lift them with their own little finger (Matthew 23:4). And so Jesus says to those in the crowd who are already feeling this persecution, “Just because religious leadership is on your case, this does not mean you are on the wrong track. In fact, it is these men, these so-called religious leaders, who are opposing me.” Wow! How bold is Jesus in straightening out true membership in the kingdom!

Kingdom Responsibility

And then Jesus pivots His sermon. For these first several verses He has been throwing the door wide open—to the depressed, to the sad, to the lowly, to the

spiritually marginal, to the humble, to those viewed poorly by religious establishment. And now He calls the crowds to greatness (Matthew 5:13-16):

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Imagine how these words must have felt to those who believed their lives were worthless. Jesus is saying, “You can make a difference. You can do my work. You can make the world a better place. You can bring spice and color to the world. You can turn the world upside down and right side up!” Jesus’ message is not only one of acceptance (you are beloved by God and can be part of this kingdom), His message is also one of confidence (you are able to do great things for God with your life). “I love you and I expect amazing things from you.” And the crowds, who had felt neither the tenderness of God nor His confidence in them, were amazed.

A Seat for All

In conclusion, a story.

A few years ago my wife and I planned a party for our preschool-aged daughter, Audrey. You have to put quite a bit of thought into doing something like this correctly. We made decisions about the kind of food, decorations, games, and crafts that would be fun (and not too messy) for five-year-olds. The night of the party came and everything was going along exceptionally well. The kids were having a blast and the other parents, we could tell, were pleased. At some point during the party we invited all the parents and children to the finished basement of our home, where we keep an upright piano, to play the game “musical chairs.” We placed ten chairs in a circle, facing outward—one chair for each little boy and girl. My wife explained the rules of the game and the children took their seats. I started to play

the piano and, per the rules of the game, the children leapt out of their chairs and began to run in a circle. My wife removed one of the chairs, I played for a few more seconds, and then the music stopped. Ten little boys and girls rushed for the nine remaining chairs—all of them successfully claiming a seat except for one little boy. Immediately, this small chair-less five-year-old looked over at his mommy and daddy and burst into tears. Sobbing, he ran over to them. My wife and I glanced at each other with a quizzical look. *That didn't go as we thought it would.* And so I started to play the piano again—and nine little boys and girls ran in a circle. My wife removed another chair, I played a few more seconds, and then the music stopped. This time, nine little boys and girls raced for the eight remaining chairs. Eight claimed a space, leaving one girl the odd person out. Immediately, she looked to her mommy and daddy, burst into tears, and ran into their waiting arms. My wife and I looked at each other with understanding. *If we don't do something quickly this is going to turn from bad to worse!* And so we coaxed all the (shaken) children to try one more time. My wife replaced the two missing chairs. The children each took a seat. I started to play the piano, and . . . no chair was removed. I played for a few more seconds and then the music stopped. Ten little boys and girls raced for ten available chairs.

And every one of them found a seat.

They screamed and yelled and shouted at me, “Pastor Alex, do it again! Pastor Alex, play it again!”

And we played that game until those kids (and my fingers) were completely worn out.

The kingdom of heaven has a seat for everyone. There's room enough for every little boy, every little girl, each and every child of God. The music of heaven invites all of us to join in a heavenly game filled with laughter, and joy, and the opportunity to draw others in to play.

No matter your place in life. No matter your circumstance. No matter your past.

God has a place for you. Will you join the game and take your seat? ●

DAY 5 | MARK 2:13-17

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A Table on Earth A Table In Heaven

by Eddie Hypolite

How do you go about defining who is allowed into your circle of friendship and who is excluded? Do you have a mental “worthiness test” you put them through? Is it based on their religious and social standing? Do they have to be Christian in general or Adventist specifically? Do they have to be Facebook friends in good and regular standing or are you a little more flexible than that?



Eddie Hypolite is the author of this sermon. He can be reached at eddie@the1project.org.

Take a few minutes and break into groups and answer the question:
How do you define who’s in and who’s out in your friend groups?

If there was one thing more than any other about Jesus that annoyed the rulers of His day and confused even His disciples, it was the way that He treated people who were social outcasts. Everyone believed that when the Messiah came, He would restore the fortunes of Israel again, but no one ever expected the kingdom to be made up of everyone and anyone in society.

The inclusion of the ‘outcast of society’ into the kingdom and favor of God, was never a move anyone saw coming. And yet this is what makes the life and ministry of Jesus so beautiful as you read the gospels.

Mark 2:13-17 paints a picture of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish, not only in the society of Israel, but also in the hearts of His disciples.

A Table of Separation

Levi, also known as Matthew, is a tax collector. He is hated by both Jews and Gentiles because he collects the Roman tax. The Roman tax was set by the Romans, but no one really knew what that tax was except the tax collectors. So it was the practice of the tax collectors to add more to the tax and keep extra for themselves. Levi was all the more hated because he was a Jew collecting the Roman tax, and was considered worse than a Gentile. By all accounts he was neither kingdom nor disciple material. As a Jew he had grown up religious and had been a member of the Adventurer, Pathfinder, youth club, and Sabbath school of his day. But somewhere along the road, he got distracted by the city lights like the prodigal son and thought that making a quick dollar would make him happy. It is curious what one would do to short circuit the road to happiness. He crossed over to the 'enemy' line and started to work against his own people.

As is the case for many young people who walk the Levi road, sooner or later, they realize that the pursuit of happiness apart from God is like peeling an onion; they find out at the end of the day that there is nothing inside. Levi did not quite know what to do to process his anguish; he could not go to the synagogue, as he would probably experience the rejection of his people there. So he kept it to himself, until Jesus, who has a way of showing up in timely fashion, showed up.

The Power of Love

Verse 13 says that Jesus intentionally passes by the booth where Levi sits working, stops, and addresses him directly with the words, "Follow me!" There is something profoundly simple about the kingdom here that we must not miss.

Jesus does not wait for people to find Him, He finds them first. We are not called to wait for people to find us; the kingdom of God is actively seeking the lost and

going to where the lost are. The invitation “Follow me” is given to affirm God’s love for Levi even though he is a social outcast.

If people know they are loved and accepted, even when they sit at the “tax booths” of life that make them socially despised, there is a transforming power from God that enables them to get up from where they are and move to where He is. The world will not care what we know until they know that we care!

Three quick lessons for us present themselves from these two verses (13 & 14).

- 1. Lives empower lives!** The teaching of Jesus that will affect people the most in our societies are those written into our everyday existence. Jesus’ words, actions, and life were all one and the same. What He taught He lived and what He said reflected who He truly was. This is what will make people leave from where they are and follow us as we follow Christ!
- 2. Consistent love is impossible to ignore.** Consistency is the by-product of sensing the value God places on the people He sends you to. The actions of Jesus for the lost remained consistent all through His ministry and life. Jesus did not love by accident, nor should we. Love is the most intentional giving in the human experience, one which doesn’t happen by accident, which is why it’s so transforming.
- 3. Jesus associates with outcasts.** Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:17 that God did not send His son to condemn the world but rather to save the world. So He shows His commitment to that ideal by spending more time with the outcasts of society and bringing to them the truth of God’s kingdom. And what is that truth? It is the fact that God associates His love and life with them and does so without apology.

Mark recalls that Levi gets up and leaves his booth. He leaves everything! He can never go back there again and does not choose to. His new direction far outweighs his past reality. What is the result of this new direction? He extends to Jesus and others the love of the kingdom that has been extended to him. He has spent

his working life making a table for taxes and the things that have made him an outcast, but now he makes a table for Jesus in his home.

A Table for Jesus

Mark 2:15 says that Levi throws a massive party, a banquet, to which he invites Jesus, his guest of honor. Look who else is invited to the party: at the table with Jesus are tax collectors, sinners, and other outcasts. No distinction is made between them and the disciples. Mark 2:15 simply records that “there were many who followed Him.”

The banquet Matthew set out for his ‘outcast’ friends is reminiscent of the wedding banquet Jesus refers to in one of his end-time kingdom parables in Matthew 22. The banquet was filled with all kinds of people, “good and bad.” The strange thing about this parable is that those who finally showed up were not originally invited. Those who were invited never showed up. Everything was ready, the table had been set, and the band was ready for the wedding march; the king was at the door and the son was waiting for his bride, the church, but no one showed up. The king sent his servants to remind the guests of the invitation, but they were too preoccupied with their own personal business and had no time for the king or his son; some even got upset at the king’s insistence and mistreated and killed the innocent servants.

I wonder who Jesus was referring to in this parable. It is easy to immediately point the finger at the Jewish people who turned the king’s son down. But what about religious people today; what about me? Am I so preoccupied by my own personal pursuits that I disregard my greater calling in life, the king’s invitation? Do I get impatient with those sent by the king to remind me of his invitation? I wonder.

So the king ends up sending his servants to open the invitation to people in the streets, to anyone who could be found and anyone who was willing to come, and soon the room was filled with guests.

What a beautiful image of the inclusive love of Jesus for lost humanity.

Coming back to Levi, the invitation that he made to his 'outcast' friends was a powerful testimony to a life that has been changed by this love and acceptance. Jesus called Levi from a table that separated him from humanity and salvation, and Levi makes a table for Jesus that brings humanity and salvation into one glorious space.

As always, there were those who didn't like the idea that the kingdom could be a place where Jesus doesn't have favorites, that all are loved equally by Him. As a result, verse 17 says that they complain, but Jesus makes it clear that the sick need help, and that is His reason for reaching out to them.

Lessons from a Jesus Table

The actions of Levi in opening his home, not only to Jesus but to all the people he used to sit with, open four very important images of the kingdom and Jesus that must not be missed.

1. A table for Jesus isn't always filled with the obvious.

We must never assume that we know who Jesus wants to save and who He doesn't. When Jesus says "whomsoever will," He means it literally. Let us never presume to judge who can and who cannot be saved. Let us be a church that doesn't open the table of love and fellowship to just the obvious.

2. A table for Jesus is an open table.

Many even today fear the idea of opening the doors of our church to anyone and everyone, but the kingdom is saving 'anyone's' and 'everyone's' each and every day. We have no say in whose heart the Spirit of God chooses to work. We only get to see the result and then welcome them into the family so that they can grow in love and grace

also. Let us always make our table an open table, knowing that Jesus sits at these tables especially.

3. A table for Jesus remembers who used to sit there.

Levi never forgot both where he came from and who it was that used to sit at his table before Jesus called him. It is so easy for us as Christians to forget where it was that Jesus found us and how far He has brought us. Jesus wants us to remember the people we may have left behind once we find Him. He wants us to remember who used to sit with us and make a place for them at our new tables. We must be careful of becoming 'over-saved.' An 'over-saved' person looks with scorn on those they used to associate with, because they have a new life that is so unlike their old life. Like Levi, when we find this new life in Jesus, we must remember those we left behind and make a place for them also.

4. A table for Jesus never apologizes for, but always defends, who sits there.

Jesus never apologized for the people who sat at His table. He always defended both their presence and reason for sitting with Him. He came to show, by actions first and words second, that God was truly with us. He did not distance Himself from those who the rulers of the temple believed were beyond help and not worthy of salvation.

We live within a society that no longer listens to our words, they listen to our actions. The old saying is so true, "Actions speak louder than words!" The life and love of Jesus in us will always be known in how we defend the unloved and dispossessed in our society. Jesus made a point of doing this so that we would know how to live with others and each other.

5. Lastly, Jesus is the only way to the table.

Going back to the parable of the wedding banquet, the king had made provision for wedding garments for every guest at the door. But

some, however, came in and refused to avail themselves of the special garment that had been fashioned for them. Our only access to the end-time, eternal kingdom banquet is the robe of righteousness that Jesus freely provides through His precious blood on Calvary. In this robe of righteousness, there is not a single thread of human devising; ours is simply to accept.

But we are glad that it is God and God alone who makes this ultimate decision about ultimate access to the eternal kingdom, for we do not have access to the hearts of people. Ours is to be generous in our invitation to all mankind and leave the separation of good and bad to the only one who reads the motives and intents of the human heart.

Each of us are tables for Jesus: our homes, churches, school rooms, even Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter feeds and pages can also be tables for Jesus if we choose to use them in a way that brings glory to Him.

Could it be, that for a Church that struggles to make the gospel have any real impact in our western secular societies, that Jesus has made it as simple as opening our homes? Could it be that the true good news of the kingdom Jesus is asking us to share is our transformed lives and open tables? Is it at all possible that Jesus is asking us to share changed lives because they speak louder than any sermon ever will?

While we are busy trying to find the next great idea, maybe the great idea is simply finding Jesus a table.

Let us take the time to pray for three things right now:

1. That we will sense our need of a Savior right now!
2. That we will create spaces / tables where Jesus and society meet.
3. That I will never be ashamed of who Jesus chooses to sit with. ●

DAY 6 | LUKE 17:21
THE KINGDOM OF GOD
It is Within You

by Brandy Kirstein

Southern Adventist University is located on the outskirts of Chattanooga, TN. Chattanooga is an earth-friendly, trendy, gorgeous city with a rich, historic background. Most of its inhabitants enjoy a wide variety of outdoor sports and delicious local restaurants, all the while never knowing what lies beneath their feet. You see, there are two Chattanoogaes: the one we see and the one we don't. What we don't see lies beneath the streets - a maze of history's commerce buried a century ago, but seen only in traces found in basements and passages that once were the city's ground floor. We don't see the town that Chattanooga buried in order to save the one we have today. After a series of devastating floods in the late 1800s and early 20th century, the town that began as a river trading post at Ross's Landing reinvented itself. In time, they raised a 40-block area of the city by about a story. Second floors became first floors. First floors became basements. Towering window arches became foundation decor or vents. Structurally, this leaves the city in a bit of danger as beams are rusted and the former buildings are falling apart under the new ones that have taken their place. Yet this massive feat, the raising of a town, has gone largely ignored in city history. There is almost no documentation of its reality and the majority of the Chattanooga population doesn't even know it existed. Meanwhile, every day they live in false security, walking on foundations under their feet, never knowing what lies beneath.



Brandy Kirstein is the author of this sermon. She can be reached at brandy@the1project.org.

Visibility vs. Invisibility

What if one day, the room they were sitting in just collapsed 40 feet into the ground? What would that do to their perception of reality? Would that change the way they walked? Would they suddenly feel insecure about walking around in Chattanooga? Or anywhere for that matter? We place a lot of faith in the things that we can see, in the structures that are built around us. Meanwhile, there is a whole other world happening that we are unaware of. Did you know that our eyes only see something at 1/24 of a second? Television is seen at 15 frames per second; we see what appears as a flicker, meaning there are 15 instants that the eye is not seeing or able to process. Galaxies are moving incredibly fast, but appear to be motionless because of the vantage point in which we sit. Yet an insect flying an inch past our faces will be able to move faster than the human eye can keep track of, thus revealing that an object is considered invisible if it moves faster at a certain distance than the eye and brain can process. But, is it really invisible? Is the insect in front of our face invisible to the hawk (whose vision is 3-4 times better than ours)? So, invisibility is based on our perception. In which case, invisibility is not even real! If something exists then something can see it, but it may not always be us. And yet, we are obsessed with what we can see, what we can touch, what we can hear, what our own senses tell us as though they have universal authority when, really, the ground is about to fall in underneath us.

Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 17:20-21. I'm reading from the New King James Version (this is important). "Now when he was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

A Kingdom Without or Within

So, here we have the Pharisees coming to Jesus and basically sarcastically challenging Him. John the Baptist, three years before, came out of the wilderness loudly proclaiming that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And, since then,

Jesus had been talking about the kingdom of God constantly - "the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl...like a mustard seed...like a treasure...is at hand..." So, the Pharisees are like, "Okay, Jesus, so where is this kingdom you've been talking about for so long? And when will it arrive? Because so far, we don't SEE it!" They are totally trying to undermine Jesus' ministry and claims of authority from God. They are fully insinuating that Jesus' mission failed.

There were many Jews at the time who were "waiting for the kingdom of God." But, when the King did come, He didn't look like a king. And when He said the kingdom had arrived, it didn't look like a kingdom. Which is why it was so ludicrous to the Pharisees that people believed Him! It was so irritating when He was such an obvious fraud (in their minds). But! They were looking on the outside. On Earth, Jesus was not a king and didn't have a kingdom. Today He would have been classed with the insane for the things He was saying (cf. Mark 3:21). Which is why they mocked Him on the cross by placing above His head "This is Jesus - King of the Jews." It was meant to be sarcastic. They were trying to show how ludicrous it was that people believed Him in an attempt to take away any hope anyone still had at thinking He would rise up as a king. But, He did rise—not as a King of this earth, but a new kind of King to come, for those who belong to a new kind of kingdom, an invisible kingdom, because it isn't yet time for it to be revealed. Back to Luke 17:21.

How does Jesus respond? He says, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation..." The kingdom of God is NOT something you SEE. Which is why no one will be able to say, "See here!" or "See there!" Because the KINGDOM of GOD is WITHIN YOU! What?! This is very confusing. Not just for the Jews, but for modern Christian scholars. Let's start with our modern day scholars.

Depending on which Bible you have, it will be translated differently. Some will say "within you" and some will say "among you" and some will say "in the midst of you." Any other variations out there? The actual word used in the Greek is the adverb "entos," which literally translates "within or inside." The only other place this word appears in the New Testament is in Matthew 23:26 where it is translated "inside," speaking of the inside of a cup, so language alone makes the translation

of “within” seem more accurate. The reason some Bibles and scholars have problems with this word is because they did not believe Jesus could have told the Pharisees that the kingdom of God was within THEM because it obviously was not, so the translators altered the wording according to their interpretation. But, if you look at the context of the verse, Jesus is contrasting the external with the internal. He says the kingdom of God is not something you can see; therefore meaning it is something you don’t see. So, it can’t be something “among them” or in the “midst of them” or else they could see it. The SDA Commentary translates it this way: “The kingdom of God is not something you may expect to see by close observation with your natural eyesight. You will discover it, if at all, within your own hearts.” Ellen White helps us clarify this passage by proposing, “The kingdom of God begins in the heart. Look not here or there for manifestations of earthly power to mark its coming.”

The Mystery of the Kingdom of God

Jesus, by saying this, was directly addressing the incorrect thinking of the Pharisees - the Messiah was supposed to come and raise up the Jewish nation above all the other nations in the political world. The Jews had turned all of the spiritual promises of God into promises of earthly power and riches. So, Jesus corrects them and says, “I’m not talking about a kingdom made of bricks and mortar; I’m talking about a kingdom of flesh and blood; I’m not talking about who rules the land; I’m talking about who rules your heart; I’m not talking about temporary things; I’m talking about eternal things. The kingdom of God has nothing to do with vain ambition, birth rights, theocratic position, rich or poor, handsome or ugly, driver’s license or bus ticket, honor roll or detention, Bieber hair or facial hair, freshman or senior. It has to do with your heart.”

Is anyone else relieved by this? God does not decide who is His based on what others see you as, because our vision is limited by their vantage point. He chooses you based on who you are and what potential lies inside of you. Just like when he told Samuel to go and anoint little teenage nothing David; He said, “Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.” Wow.

You see, the Pharisees were basing their perception of the kingdom of God on what they could see. The human heart and mind is invisible to them and us; but God, like the hawk, has better vision than we do. He knows what truly lies underneath our feet and whether we are walking securely or about to fall. And Jesus is telling them to have faith, which is belief in the things we do not see because God sees ALL.

Reality is, even if the Pharisees understood exactly what Jesus was talking about, they weren't interested in this kind of kingdom. They wanted position and power in the human realm. They wanted an earthly kingdom. They wanted a visible kingdom. In contrast, Jesus takes the kingdom of God from a visible tangible world to an unseen, internal world that may or may not be something witnessable by others except God. There may not be earthly benefits to this kind of kingdom. The outward kingdom has the benefits of prestige, power, popularity; the inner only that of humility and love – not very appealing for those focused on life here. Which brings up a question - what kind of kingdom are you looking for? Because whichever you are looking for is what you will find. And will find you. And will enlist you as a servant to it. Because these two kingdoms are not allies. You are either a citizen of one or the other. The earthly kingdom often has instant gratification and appeals more to your senses, making you feel what you want to feel, but is deceitfully made of structures that are not secure or real (like Chattanooga). The earthly kingdom seeks after its own resulting in poor relationships, injured people, disappointment, death, destruction, slavery, imprisonment, and hatred. The kingdom of God is based on promises that are sure, though they may have delayed gratification. The kingdom of God is ruled by the Holy Spirit, giving you the ability to see and understand the invisible realm of the universe wherein abides life, creation, freedom, and love. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned, which is why the kingdom of earth will send the thief to prison, but the kingdom of God will give him your shirt and shoes also. The kingdom of earth will fight back, the kingdom of God will turn the other cheek. The kingdom of earth is constantly striving to prove themselves and the kingdom of God strives to lift up others higher than themselves. The kingdom of the earth will use you and discard you when they don't need you anymore. The kingdom of God will love you unconditionally and cherish you and help you grow into the fullness of all that you can become.

How do the people of this invisible kingdom become like that? This is the mystery of the kingdom of God. How does something so big fit inside someone so small? Like water in a cup, often the content molds to fit the container, but this is not so with God. When the Holy Spirit fills our hearts, He then shapes us into His likeness. So, physics is reversed and the container must mold to fit the content. How others view you may or may not be changed. Your circumstances may remain the same, but your vantage point, the place from which you perceive the world, is changed. In *Testimonies Volume 7*, Ellen White says, "The kingdom of God comes not with outward show. It comes through the gentleness of the inspiration of His Word, through the inward working of His Spirit, the fellowship of the soul with Him who is its life. The greatest manifestation of its power is seen in human nature brought to the perfection of the character of Christ."

The Kingdom is Now

Lastly, this verse is so important because it is one of the few verses that places the kingdom in the present. It is no longer something we are waiting for, but something we can take part of NOW. When we decide to join this kingdom, we NOW experience peace instead of turmoil, joy instead of despair, love instead of loneliness. And we have a legion of angels ready to battle the demons on our behalf as we pick up the real armor of God, because in the REAL world we do not battle against flesh and blood; earthly weapons won't work in the invisible kingdom. We must have the sword of the Spirit, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and our feet covered in the gospel of peace. Then, we can stand firm in what we are battling. Then, we have an entire kingdom backing us up in prayer, with angels, and with God Himself. Who can stand against us? We are an invincible, invisible kingdom!

There are many people who choose God because of the fears of the afterlife. They want to go to heaven. But how will heaven be a better fit for you then, if it is not a place you would want to live now? The glory of heaven is being with Jesus. You can have that now. The kingdom of God can begin in you now—healing you, changing you, governing you, protecting you, serving and loving through you,

and preparing an eternity to spend with you. Heaven is the continuance of what is happening now; it doesn't start at the Second Coming—that will be the external manifestation of the present invisible kingdom. And it will be a party you won't want to miss! But, until then...

A true story: Jessica Eaves from Guthrie, Oklahoma recently had her wallet stolen by a man while she was grocery shopping. Most people in that situation would immediately get the authorities involved, but she found a way to resolve her problem herself. "I saw this gentleman down the aisle from me," Jessica shares. "He walked behind me, and when I got a couple of aisles over, I realized my wallet was gone. I spotted him in a crowded aisle and approached him," she continues. "I'm a pretty out-there personality, but I was quiet and calm. I said to him, 'I think you have something of mine. I'm gonna give you a choice. You can either give me my wallet and I'll forgive you right now, and I'll even take you to the front and pay for your groceries.'"

The alternative? Jessica reporting him to the police.

"He reached into his hoodie pocket and gave me my wallet," she recalls, adding that the man was extremely grateful for her help and forgiveness. "He started crying when we walked up to the front," she says. "He said he was sorry about 20 times by the time we went from the pickle aisle to the front. He told me he was desperate."

She spent \$27 on his groceries, which included milk, bread, bologna, crackers, soup and cheese. "The last thing he said was, 'I'll never forget tonight. I'm broke, I have kids, I'm embarrassed and I'm sorry.'"

"Some people are critical because I didn't turn him in, but sometimes all you need is a second chance," she adds.

This is an example of the kingdom now—not just what she did for him, but the change that took place in his heart as a result of her grace. He instantly turned from a thief to a friend. What would the world look like now if the invisible kingdom became visible through the outpouring the Holy Spirit in our lives? Don't

you want to be part of that kind of kingdom? What you see and experience in the world can never compare to what God can do from His all-knowing vantage point. Nothing is invisible to Him. Nothing is truly invisible to begin with. All is based on our perception. Do you trust God's or your own? Do you live in the external world or the internal world? Join the ranks today, for the kingdom of God is here and now and accessible. But I leave you with this question, is it within you? And if it is, what will you do with it? ●

DAY 7 | MARK 4:30-34

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Mustard Seed

A Parable for Community

by Dilys Brooks

We live in a global community. With the use of the Internet and cellular devices we are always a few minutes away from discovering breaking news and latest trends. We even have a new vocabulary for this age of 24-hour communication with our virtual communities and followers. “Tweeting,” “Google-ing,” “Face Time,” and “Viral Videos” have become a part of our daily conversation. In a fast-paced world where our needs are met in moments, it isn’t any wonder that we may lose sight of God’s intention for this planet we call home. Is it any wonder that although we appear to be always connected, we may actually be more alone than we realize? It is not unusual to see people gathered together for dinner or on an outing and almost everyone is on a mobile device connecting with someone virtually while ignoring those who are right in front of them. Gone are the days when you could be expected to know all the people who lived on your street, yet we can claim friendships with people who live all over the world who we may never meet face to face. This physical disconnect has affected all layers of society no matter where we live in the world. And it most definitely has affected our church community.



Dilys Brooks is the author of this sermon. She can be reached at dilys@the1project.org.

Community is defined by the Merriman-Webster Online Dictionary as: “a group of people who live in the same area (such as a city, town, or neighborhood) or a

group of people who have the same interests, religion, race, etc. or a group of nations.”¹ Today many neglect gathering for worship, preferring to “watch on-line,” while others do not make permanent roots with a church because they like the flexibility of being with their friends. It has occurred to me as I have watched this phenomenon over the past several years that many of us fail to recognize that this way of living is not a reflection of what Scripture tells us about community.

A passage of Scripture that highlights our need to recalibrate and rethink our understanding of this community is found in Mark 4:30-32, NKJV:

Then He said, “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable shall we picture it? It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth; but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.”

The multitudes that followed the Messiah were unsure of what the “kingdom of God” was, and He often used stories and parables to explain what He meant. Their confusion was understandable because, as the people who were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were challenged by the occupation and oppression of the Romans and hoped for salvation from the promised Messiah. These masses had heard and responded to the preaching of John the Baptist. They were aware of the miracle at Jesus’ baptism. Every demon cast out, person healed, or miraculous feeding of thousands awakened within them the hope that perhaps this indeed was the Promised One. When Jesus declared that the kingdom of God was here, many hoped that this was indeed the warrior-king who would deliver them and reestablish Israel as kingdom. There was an expectation of what their community would become. What are your expectations of Jesus? Are they founded on what He has done in your life, or just what you wanted Him to do?

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community>

What is the kingdom of God?

Why haven't we been preaching or teaching about this before, especially since this was Jesus' message as traveled for three years through the dusty towns of Galilee? Jesus' first message after His Jordan baptism was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17–18 and Mark 1:15, NKJV). This declaration revealed that there was a new community, society, and way of life, which was being firmly established by Jesus. This new community would thrive with Jesus as its head, its chief, its leader, its king.

Jesus' method of teaching was not unusual. The rabbis, religious teachers, and contemporaries of His day often used stories and parables to explain theological ideas. Jesus' favorite type of story was often encapsulated in a parable. A parable is a simple story with familiar characters and activities that illustrate a principle. Not everyone who heard these stories could readily understand them. As a matter of fact, Jesus often told the parables to large audiences and many would leave unsure of the meaning. He would, however, tell His disciples privately what many of them meant. As we seek to understand the "kingdom of God," we must scrutinize this story more closely. Those who came to see and hear Jesus were never disappointed because He would often use the ordinary, common things from their Galilean experience to educate them about God. Can you picture them standing on the shores of the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, or the rolling, dusty hills listening to Jesus for hours? Have you ever been excited about going to class? Have you ever wanted to be the first in the classroom to get a good seat before the teacher came in? This is how many of those who were following after Jesus had to have felt. They were excited to hear what interesting thing He was going to point to today in order to get His point across.

The setting of the text places us with Jesus in the middle of a teaching session from the stern of a boat by the Sea of Galilee. We aren't sure how long the people have been gathered here or what time of the day it is. What we know is that the crowds have come to hear Jesus and He does not disappoint. Some of the stories

recorded in Mark 4 have an agrarian focus on “growing things”: the sower scattering seed (Mark 4:1-20) and the parable of the seed (Mark 1:26-29).

When we look at this short passage we might become distracted by its simplicity and miss the importance of the message. Jesus tells the attentive audience that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus states that this small seed grows to become greater than all the other herbs or bushes in the garden. In Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of this story Jesus refers to the mature mustard plant as a tree.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Matthew 13:31–32, NKJV).

“Then He said, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches” (Luke 13:18–19, NKJV).

It is important to note that the mustard tree wasn’t ever the tallest tree that could grow in a garden, because olive trees usually towered over the other plants. So the point to the listeners is that the kingdom of God is not determined by the size of the seed. Those listening would be familiar with being left out of the ruling class as a result of being occupied by Rome. In choosing a mustard seed, Jesus was letting His hearers know that He was more concerned with how they finished than how they began. The mustard seed that was common to the area of Palestine was the black mustard and was cultivated in both gardens and the fields. The plants could grow to three meters (10 ft.) in height but had the smallest seed of plants that were cultivated at that time.² The mustard seed could be seen as a metaphor for potential. There was great growth potential in the seed, and there is great potential in the hearers as well. They needed to learn how to unlock this potential. How could they become a part of this kingdom?

² Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (738). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Farming instead of War

“It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown on the ground, is smaller than all the seeds on earth” (Mark 4:31, NKJV). He simply says that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Jesus was counter-cultural. Jesus used a farming analogy to demonstrate God’s plan for humanity, which was antithetical to the expectation of a nation awaiting a warrior-king. He uses this story to create a paradigm shift in the minds of His listeners from fighting to farming; from war to worship; from Caesar to community; from grappling with the law to grace. One Bible commentator, R. P. Martin, states, “Yet everything about Jesus’ ministry controverted their understanding of who the Leader would be. Instead, Jesus tried to instill in their minds the prospect that the road to His future glory was bound to run by way of the cross, with its experience of rejection, suffering, and humiliation.”³ Jesus stated, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6–7, NKJV). Seeds hold life within them, yet in order for the seed to produce life it must die. Jesus states in John 12:24, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12:24, NKJV). The size of the seed doesn’t dictate its growth or function. However, small seeds are quicker to ripen and can be dispersed sooner. This littlest of seeds grows to be a tree that is formidable in its size and the amount of shade and protection it supplies to all who seek shelter therein. God has made you, seed, to be a part of His everlasting kingdom. He has placed within you everything that is necessary, not just for your survival, but for the spreading of the gospel. Are you willing to die, die to your self, your desires, your plans, so that God can get the glory?

As I stated before, Jesus’ audience had a first hand experience with farming—more so than we do—which means He didn’t have to explain the conditions necessary for this seed to grow. While it is true that we could all “Google” this information about farming and growing things, if we lack the experience, we may not fully understand the lessons in Jesus’ analogy. The seed undergoes a process called “germination” in order to unlock the new life within. There are three central

³ Martin, R. P. (2003). Messiah. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen & T. C. Butler, Ed.) (1115). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

conditions that allow the seed to germinate: (1) the embryo must be alive, called “seed viability.” (2) Any dormancy requirements that prevent germination must be overcome. (3) The proper environmental conditions must exist for germination.⁴

Once the conditions are met, the seed will germinate and new life, an immature plant called a seedling, begins to grow. The seedling will grow to adulthood and form a mature plant. Jesus jumps from seed to mature plant without describing the processes that bring the plant to maturity. He then states in verse 32, “but when it is sown, it grows up and becomes greater than all herbs, and shoots out large branches, so that the birds of the air may nest under its shade.”

In *Christ’s Object Lessons* we read, “The germ in the seed grows by the unfolding of the life-principle, which God has implanted. Its development depends upon no human power. So it is with the kingdom of Christ. It is a new creation. Its principles of development are the opposite of those that rule the kingdoms of this world” (77).

Let’s reflect once more on what was heard by the Galileans who were listening to the planting analogy. We must also try to pick up on the clues that are hidden within the telling. The Galilean audience knew the value and worth of the mustard seed. It was worth being cultivated. Jesus’ statement affirms that they are indeed God’s chosen ones. Yet their task was to replicate the love of God to the world. Jesus, God with us, was now reframing their concept of “kingdom.” Today young people are also being invited to live counter-culturally and to reject the pseudo community and pseudo friendships created in cyberspace that seem to be calling with every chirp, ding, and whistle of our digital devices. Jesus is calling you to something better. You are being called by Christ to become the community that is patterned after God’s ideal for us. The implications for both hearers of this message—then and now—are that we are invited to shift our thinking and grow. In order for the plant to grow from seedling to maturity, the gardener waters, feeds, weeds, and prunes the plants to maintain the optimum growing environment. Seeds produce plants and plants produce yet more seeds. From this one seed we know that there will be more mustard plants. Simple enough. Yet with the Messiah, nothing is ever simple.

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seed>

Kingdom instead of nationalism

While it is true the parables were theological stories with contemporary illustrations, Jesus' stories often left His listeners confounded and confused. Mark 4:33 states, "And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. But without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples" (Mark 4:33–34, NKJV). Because of our method of wanting to award everyone and not exclude anyone, this seems unfair. Yet Jesus seemed very comfortable with the mystery that surrounded His teaching.

One pertinent piece of information left to reflect on is the definition of a "kingdom." A kingdom is a politically organized community or major territorial unit having a form of government headed by a king or queen.⁵ Remember that those who listened to Jesus' story are hoping above all hope that this "kingdom" that Jesus is referring to will overthrow the Romans and reestablish Israel to its former glory, similar to the reign of Solomon, as well as usher in the period of safety, peace, and a world that worshipped Yahweh. Let's be candid. The argument could be made that Israel was more nationalistic; that is, they felt strong loyalty to and were proud of their country. Israel may have believed that it was better and more important than other country. A kingdom must have a ruler; people swear their fealty to this monarch who in turn promises to take care of his subjects. Jesus offers them an opportunity to trust and depend on the Sovereign God instead of their heritage. We too, as young people and adults, must be mindful that we don't hold on to our personal views at the expense of growing into the kingdom of God. We cannot be more concerned with holding on to the trappings of Adventism at the expense of growing God's kingdom.

Kingdoms were usually ruled with military might and with advisers who provided wisdom to the king about how to govern his subjects. Jesus is once again counter-cultural and creates a kingdom where the King dies for His subjects in order for them to live. He fights on our behalf not for an earthly realm, but instead for a realm modeled after God's heavenly kingdom where all the subjects swear fealty because of their love and appreciation of the King. When we each accept Jesus

5 Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.

and submit to His authority as King, our faith grows and becomes a place for others to come and find rest in Jesus.

Implications for Us Today

Are we reflecting this kingdom of God on the earth? Have the central spiritual conditions been met in order for you to grow as this mustard seed? In order for this to happen (1) Jesus has to be alive in you, thus making your faith sustainable. (2) You can't allow anything or anyone in your life to force this seed of faith to be dormant, thus stunting or preventing growth. (3) You must remove anything in your environment that blocks the Holy Spirit from sparking the growth of Jesus fully in your hearts.

Just as a mustard seed can't grow in soil if the right conditions are not met, this spiritual mustard seed can't grow and reproduce or provide shelter. I'm so thankful that Jesus is available to help us get the environment and conditions optimized so that we can grow and mature. If they are unmet, why not ask God to show you today what you must throw out, cut off, weed or pull out of your lives to ensure that the kingdom of God begins to grow where you are? For those who can affirm that the spiritual conditions are met, you aren't off the hook! Just as the plant is cared for by the gardener to ensure it reaches maturity, we too—you too—must submit to the hand of the gardener. Jesus is the gardener. We must submit as He maintains the optimum environment through life's circumstances for us to grow. He will prune, weed, feed, and nurture us. Unfortunately, we can't dictate the conditions and orchestrate the timing. Are you submitting your plans to Jesus daily? Do you accept when He allows others to get the "things you want" before you do? Are you able to be thankful no matter what challenges you experience?

The world is in desperate need of authentic, life-giving community. As followers of Christ we get to share the good news that God desires to provide this to every person on this planet. Our challenge and invitation today is to be the mustard seed that grows into a mustard plant, so that the people who we interact with in our families, churches, schools, and communities will come and find rest and shelter. ●

DAY 8 | MATTHEW 20:1-16

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

By Grace Alone

by Gilbert Cangy

When I migrated to Australia in September 1981, I received good counsel from some well-intentioned migrant friends who had arrived in the country before I did. They suggested that I should immediately find a job—any job—and not to be too choosy or difficult as my priority was to very quickly achieve a measure of financial independence. I took counsel and made it known to my friends and fellow church members that I was in fact available for any job.

Soon after, my new friend Kevin approached me after church to suggest that he was a production manager and that there was a vacancy where he worked and I could have the job if I wanted. I immediately accepted and did feel the need to ask about the nature of the job, in view of the counsel I had received. The only things I asked were where the job was, when I could start, and what time did I have to report.

He immediately responded, “Monday morning at 5:00 a.m.” I thought it was a joke, and I waited for him to say so; but he went on to ask if I had a car, which I did not. As he drove to work past the place where I lived, he proposed to pick me up. He said that as the production manager he had to be there at 4:30 a.m., so he would pick me up at 4:00 a.m. and told me to bring a change of clothes. I felt trapped, but it was too late to back down.



Gilbert Cangy is the author of this sermon. He can be reached at cangyg@gc.adventist.org.

This occurred in the heart of winter and I wrapped myself in my ten dollar St Vincent de Paul coat as I waited under a streetlight to be picked up. Soon we arrived at the work place: it was at the Flemington Markets—a packing and distribution warehouse for fruits and vegetables. Upon arrival Kevin briefed me on my job: I was the new potato packer on the potato line.

The Production Manager

Large bins of dirty potatoes were tipped onto a conveyor belt; they were washed or brushed, weighed, packed in five kilogram plastic bags, and sealed automatically. These five kilogram packs ended up on a rotating table where a lady skillfully slotted five of them into large brown paper bags; this is where I came into action.

I had to lift the 25 kg potato bag and place it on a moving belt connected to a sowing machine; at the right time, I pressed a pedal to sow the bags and stacked 40 of them on a pallet. I had to use a jack to wheel the pallet to the back of the warehouse and run back; by the time I returned there were about 15 filled bags I had to catch up with and there was no stopping of the machine (sometimes we prayed for it to break down). That was my job. When the 10 a.m. bell rang for a break, I could hardly walk or move my arms—I just laid my head on the dining room table and groaned and moaned.

When I got home that afternoon, my wife hardly recognized me and immediately ordered that I should resign. I was not to resign; it would be too shameful to give up after boasting that I would do anything.

After a month on the job, my friend Kevin told me that work was booming and asked if I was willing to do some overtime—two hours every day. I was in pain, but I agreed. Again, a couple of weeks later, he told me that the business was doing really well and asked if I could come in on Sundays. Again, I said yes. By that time my friend Kevin did not pick me up any more; I caught the train and I was never late.

Can you guess which day of the week I thought was the best? (Let audience answer).

Sabbath?

Yes, in a way it was Sabbath, because I could rest.

But I must confess that there was another day of the week that was really exciting – it was Thursday – payday. Because of the hard labor and the long hours, it was always exciting to see how thick the pay packet was.

I was prepared to do this back-breaking job for long hours and deprive myself of leisure and family on Sundays because of the pay packet.

That’s how society works – the more you work, the more you get paid. You get what you deserve.

Life, in general, functions like that; there is a natural sense of justice and fairness.

There are laws that govern our society – if you live within boundaries of those laws and you are generally fine. You do what is right and are rewarded; you do wrong and you are held accountable.

You apply yourself and study hard, you pass your exams; if you don’t prepare, you pray extra hard before the exam and you still fail.

You exceed the speed limit or drive through a red light, you become a celebrity—your photo is taken.

You get what you deserve; that is to be fair.

When it comes to religious life, the same principle is in operation.

Salvation in Other World Religions

In Hinduism, there are four ways to “Moksha” or salvation – when the human mind is freed from the cycle of life and death and become one with God.

1. The way of action – you observe religious ceremonies, duties, and rites

2. The way of knowledge – you acquire complete comprehension of the universe
3. The way of devotion – your acts of worship
4. The royal road – the practice of meditation and Yoga techniques

In Buddhism, the blissful state of Nirvana is reached through the Noble Eightfold Path.

1. Right understanding;
2. Right resolve;
3. Right speech;
4. Right action;
5. Right occupation;
6. Right effort;
7. Right contemplation;
8. Right meditation.

In Islam, it is a balancing act.

In Islam salvation is based on a combination of Allah's grace and the Muslim's works. On the Day of Judgment, if a Muslim's good works outweigh his bad ones, and if Allah so wills it, he may be forgiven of all his sins and then enter into paradise.

The good that you do cancels out the wrong that you have done.

If you go for a pilgrimage in Mecca, you accrue a huge credit in the books of heaven.

If you die as a martyr defending the faith, you have direct access to heaven.

Salvation in the Christian Faith

What about Christianity? What does Jesus have to say about how we enter the kingdom of God, how we inherit eternal life?

A young man came to Jesus with that preoccupation. He came to Jesus with the one million dollar question. It's one of the most famous and most poignant stories of the gospels.

"Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'" (Matthew 19:16).

As we piece together the narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we discover that this man was young, wealthy and successful – he was a ruler in his community. Why would someone like that be interested in eternal life, or in the kingdom of God? He had everything, didn't he?

Mark tells us that Jesus was actually leaving a particular place when this young man ran up to Him and fell on his knees before Him, publicly. How desperate was he? **"What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?"** (See Mark 10:17-27.)

You see, eternal life does not just begin when Jesus comes a second time; the eternal kind of life, the eternal quality of life with peace, contentment, joy, serenity and purposeful service begins today, in the here and now, in anticipation of the glorious Second Coming of Jesus. Wealth, position, and power can never bring that; neither can religion, for this man was religious as well and professed that he had observed the law perfectly since he was a child.

The encounter of this young, rich, successful and religious young man was full of promise:

1. He had come with the right question;
2. He had come with the right attitude;
3. He had come to the right person.

Everything was set for a great ending to the story.

“What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What do I still lack?” he asked.

Approaching eternal life like the Hindu, the Buddhist, and the Muslim in terms of things to be done, he was looking for one more thing to do.

“Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One more thing you lack’, he said
(Mark 10: 21).

“TRUST ME.” Jesus’ answer to him can be summed up as “Trust me.” Place me first in your life; I cannot be just ‘one more thing’ in order to save you; you have constructed your life on the pursuit of wealth and position and religious actions which now define your existence; you have recognized that this is not satisfying the deeper longings of your heart. You have now come to me to add just one more thing to your to-do list. But you need to seek first the kingdom of God. “Trust me.”

The young man pulled out his calculator, did a quick calculation, and when he looked at the bottom dollar, the Bible says his face fell. That was going to cost him too much. With all his desperation, with all his commandment keeping, with all the love that Jesus could level at him, he left sad and unsaved. **He could not put Jesus first.** He could not place his life in the hands of Jesus. He could not sing the last hymn...“all to Jesus I surrender.” He left sad and unsaved.

The disciples who had witnessed this encounter were confused and engaged Jesus in a discussion. If this guy who seemed to be FIRST in the line for the kingdom of God could not make it, who possibly can? They could not help but ask the question:

“Who then can be saved?”

“Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” And Jesus’ final remark was “Many who are FIRST will be last, and many who are last will be first.” Remember this line, for we will come back to it.

To drive this truth home Jesus takes us back to the Flemington Market, back to the warehouse, back to the work places, and gives us an offensive parable where the entry into the end time judgment of the kingdom of God is likened to a payday scene where the human principle of “more work equals more money” is completely flouted; hence the title, ***“The Parable of the Unfair God.”***

Jesus Answers with a Parable full of Surprises

Read Matthew 20:1-2.

Here is the meeting of the rich and the poor. The rich landowner goes out early in the morning to the market place, where poor people are gathered waiting to see where food for them and their families will come from for that day. They are day laborers waiting to be offered a day’s work for a day’s wage.

The rich landowner is wise. He is out early after having done his homework and has worked out how many workers he needs to get the job done for the day.

He recruits and, before they head for the vineyard, they enter into some negotiation and wage bargaining and he ‘agrees’ to pay them one denarius for the day – which was very generous wage for the time. It is 6:00 a.m. and it is cool when they arrive in the vineyard, collect their baskets, which they strap on their backs – backpack style – and they begin the day.

Three hours later the master surprises us.

Read Matthew 20:3-5.

It is the third hour; it is 9:00 a.m.

The master’s purpose for going out is not to recruit; he has a business plan and recruiting has already been taken care of. The text tells us that he just went out and as he did, he saw others standing there who had not been employed. This master is different; he is not driven by profit making, but is touched by the plight of the needy who are doing nothing.

Now these workers have no right to a full day's wage and they know it; this time there is no discussion about wages. "Trust me – I will pay you whatever is right." So the new group sets out for the vineyard, with no bargain, but just trusting in the fairness of the master.

Imagine that you are a hard worker who has bargained for your wages and started work at 6:00 a.m. The sun is up and you have started to sweat as you climb the hills and the basket is getting heavy. Now you see a whole new bunch of workers arrive; what would you think of them? Probably that they are not as serious as you are. It is like church; you are there as Sabbath school starts – always on time.

Three hours later, the master surprises us again.

Read Matthew 20:5.

Sixth hour: Midday

Ninth hour: 3:00 p.m.

Moved by his concern and compassion for needy people, the master is still recruiting. It seems that his mind is not with a business plan anymore, but he is driven by consideration for the plight of people who will not have bread to put on the table for the night. There is no mention of wages, neither from the master, nor from the new workers. This master is relentless in his desire to meet the needs of people at the detriment of his own welfare and personal gain.

Remember that you are still the hard working people who started at 6:00 a.m. What are you thinking of those who arrive at lunch time and even at 3:00 p.m.? That it is ridiculous, isn't it? Those who arrive at midday are those who only come to church for the second half—for the divine service; those at 3:00 p.m. arrive just in time for the sermon to begin, no preliminaries. What do you think of those people?

As if we did not have enough surprises – this is now getting ridiculous.

Read Matthew 20:6,7.

This is absolutely ridiculous – the eleventh hour—a 5:00 p.m. recruit for a 6:00 p.m. finish?

Now the master engages them in conversation: he wants to know why they have been standing there “all day” doing nothing. The master must have seen them since the morning; and each time he came back, they were still there, and again at 5:00 p.m. Their response was very telling: “No one has hired us.” They were unemployable; they were worth nothing in the eyes of every prospective employer who came to the market place. They had one thing in their favor: they did not give up; they are still taking their chances at that ridiculous hour. That was a perfect scenario for this particular master who had been full of surprises all day; this generous master had a way of showing up when people needed him most, when things were just about to fall apart. So the new bunch of workers are also invited to head to the vineyard.

These are those who come for the last hymn and for fellowship lunch. What would you think of them?

By the time they get to the vineyard, get the orientation, and grab their baskets – it’s the end of the day and the bell rings; it is the end of the day’s work. Now it is pay time.

Even Now, the Master is Not Done Surprising Us.

Read Matthew 20:8.

Everybody is lined up, with the hardest workers at the head of the queue, of course. But the master instructs the foreman to reorganize the queue. “Will those who started work at 6:00 a.m. go at the back of the queue and those who just arrived come to the front?”

The master is reorganizing the line in such a way that what is about to transpire will be visible and evident to all; this distribution of wages, this verdict, this final judgment, if you will, will in fact be made manifest for all to witness and behold.

Obviously, the hard working people are not very pleased, but they reason among themselves that the master does not want to embarrass those who just arrived because they will just get some loose change and will become envious when they see the hard working ones get their full day's wage.

More surprise from the master.

Read Matthew 20:9.

The workers who just arrived receive a full day's wages. They are confused and are probably disappearing very quickly, probably thinking that the paymaster has made a mistake. The hard working people are laughing at them, thinking that they are running away out of the embarrassment of the insignificance of their wage and they ask, "How much did you get?" The first one does not dare answer; the second one just shows one finger; the hard working ones are laughing their heads off and ask, "One pondion?" (One pondion is one twelfth of a denarius); but the answer comes back, "No, one denarius."

"One denarius? One denarius for one hour's work?" Immediately, the hard working ones begin to recalculate their wages. If one hour equals one denarius, then twelve hours equals twelve denarii; the party has started in the vineyard: they are making plans for new sandals, new tunics, and family holidays.

Read Matthew 20:10a.

But the rest of the verse brings the first unpleasant surprise of the story.

Read Matthew 20:10b-12.

You see, when the paymaster places one denarius in the hand of the hard worker and the paymaster says "next," no one moves; they begin to grumble like thunder and call for the master. How do you dare do that? How dare you treat hard working people like us the same way you treated those slackers who only labored for an hour – this is so offensive and unfair.

Read Matthew 20:13-16.

“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.’”

Remember this saying? The young ruler saw himself as FIRST, he ends up last; the 5:00 p.m. workers saw themselves as LAST, they end up FIRST.

What is this about? What would you do if you were a hard working person in that vineyard on that day? What would I do? What did I do at the Flemington Markets?

This story is a stumbling block to our sense of fairness. It is truly scandalous.

As a general rule in the parables, the king, the master, the landowner is always Jesus Himself. So the question is: “Is God unfair?”

What is the point of the story?

The key to the story is found in the introduction of the parable:

“For the kingdom of heaven is like . . .”

This story is not about real work and real pay; it is about entrance to the kingdom of God today and the end time judgment of God. Entrance to the kingdom of God is not about how good you are and how many good works you have done; it is a gift of God. This is God’s way of providing eternal life. Eternity is a gift of God to all the undeserving children of the human race. Grace, God’s amazing grace, is the point of this story. All are equally undeserving of so large a sum as a denarius a day; it is given by the generosity of the Master to those who realize that they bring nothing to the negotiating table of salvation except their deep sense of their need of God’s grace. This is more readily accepted by those who are still at the market place at 5:00 p.m. and have a definite sense of their ‘unemployability’. For all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

In that sense, God is unfair when it comes to eternal life . . .

If to be fair means to give us or to treat us as we deserve, how would it be with us if God dealt with us according to our

Broken promises

Hardness of heart

Insensitivity to the needs of others

Our prejudice, our pride

Impure thoughts and motives

Our envy and jealousy

YES—God is unfair—and we should rejoice that He is unfair! For He does not treat us as we deserve.

Psalms 103:8-13

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

Isaiah 53:5, 6:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Ephesians 2:8-9:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.

Desire of Ages, page 25:

“Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. “With His stripes we are healed.”

We all have sinned.

We are spiritually bankrupt.

Christ died as our substitute.

We must believe it; admit to it; accept and trust in it.

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12-13).

The result is a spiritual transformation by the Holy Spirit.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:17-19).

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14,15).

Conclusion

(Insert personal experience or use Blondin story)

The story is told of the French tight-rope walker, Blondin, who announced that he was going to stretch a cable across the Niagara Falls all the way from the Canadian side to the U.S. side and walk across. Large crowds and the press gathered on both sides. As Blondin finished his first crossing the crowd applauded and jeered and declared him the greatest. Then Blondin took a special push bike with grooves



Make
it real and personal.
Share a story from
your own life.

in the tires and pedaled across; again the crowd went ecstatic and chanted out his name. Then Blondin took a wheelbarrow and pushed it across the Falls, and this time the crowd went wild and said that there was nothing he could not do. Then Blondin silenced the crowd and asked if they thought he could cross the Niagara with someone sitting in the wheelbarrow; they all screamed that there was no doubt that he could do it. Then Blondin asked for a volunteer. There was silence in the crowd; there was no taker.

In the person of Jesus, the kingdom of God has drawn near to us; it is at hand.

Jesus says to each of us: "It is within reach – repent and believe – I will take you across to the other side. I offer you grace, forgiveness, and a new kind of purposeful life in the present and, as your Advocate in the end time judgment, an eternal glorious kingdom when I come again soon to take my people home."

Appeal

What stands in your way? What keeps you from entering the kingdom of God today? ●



Group Discussion Questions

Day One

1. Where do you see the kingdom of God breaking into the world today?
2. What do you think of the idea that “as through Jesus we enter into rest, heaven begins here”? How much heaven should we expect to be able to experience here?
3. What makes repentance such a difficult or scary thing? How do we embrace repentance?
4. Where is God drawing you into “Kingdom action”?

Day Two

1. What is the difference between a fable and a fairytale? Why would the kingdom of God, as described by Jesus, seem like a fairytale?
2. Do you know anyone, like NFL Quarterback Tom Brady, that aches to know something more or something better than the broken reality of this world, or have you ever ached to experience something more in your own life? What would you tell a friend who was aching?
3. The reality that we see with our eyes can be so heart-breaking at times.

How does one live in the reality of the kingdom of God in the face of so many challenges and heartbreaks?

4. Is it possible to be stuck in the reality of this world as opposed to thriving in the reality of the kingdom of God? If so, how? What kind of quality of life do you think being “stuck” or overly influenced by the reality of our circumstances leads to?
5. What could you change today, what’s one area in your life where you could begin thinking differently, so that you could, like Paul, begin to live in the reality of the kingdom of God as opposed to the fable of the story of this world?

Day Three

1. Have you ever waited for something that was not as good as you had hoped? How did you feel as you waited? Anxious, bored, excited? Share with the group how you felt and what you were waiting for.
2. What are ways that you as a group or a person can be the tangible hands of Christ in the world?
3. Is your church/group missional in it’s response to the Gospel? How can you be more missional in your approach?
4. The sermon spoke of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy. But what about Orthocardia? Orthocardia can be expressed as “the right heart.” Do you do these things: Justice, Compassion, Mercy, Healing and Proclaiming the Year of the Lord’s favor with “right-heartedness”? And what does that mean in your context?

Day Four

1. How do you relate to the metaphor of “kingdom” in an age when most of the world does not live under the authority of a king or queen? Would God use the same metaphor today? How about president, prime minister, or governor? Is this language different in any way?
2. In what ways is membership in the country of God different than other kinds of membership?
3. What surprises you about how (and who) Jesus taught?
4. How can we make certain a seat is available to any and all?

Day Five

1. “Secular society no longer listens to information to find truth, instead they look for truth incarnated in a person’s life.” What are the implications for the church of a statement like this?
2. How do we help people find in themselves the value they cannot see but we clearly recognize?
3. What are some local issues taking place in the community around your church that you should be involved in?
4. Talk about the people in your life who have influenced the way you see others in a positive way.
5. The most difficult thing that Jesus is asking us to do before the Second Coming is love a lost world! What does that love look like for the average Adventist Church?

Day Six

1. What kingdom are you focused on – the one without or the one within? How can you tell?
2. Are there superficial structures that you are placing your faith in (like the city of Chattanooga)? Are there things you are relying on that are not firmly founded? What are they?
3. What would the kingdom of God look like now if it was visible?
4. Can you trust God with the things you cannot see or understand? How do you know?
5. Is there anything in your life blocking you from allowing the kingdom of God to fully explode in your heart? Have some silent prayer time for those things now.

Day Seven

1. How has your understanding of the phrase “the kingdom of God” changed?
2. What are barriers to your being the mustard seed that grows to a mature mustard plant in your home/church/community?
3. Discuss with your group practical or tangible solutions to creating authentic community instead of the virtual world of Facebook, Google + and Twitter.

Day Eight

1. How would you respond if someone was to ask you, "If Jesus was to return today would He take you to heaven?"
2. What would be the basis of your response to that question?
3. Why do you think the hardworking people in the parable were upset with the master?
4. Do you think that there will be people who will be upset like that when Jesus returns? Why?
5. If we are truly saved by grace, what place do service for God, character development, and obedience have in God's plan to save us and the world?

KEEPING IT REAL

TIPS AND IDEAS

Making Small Groups Work

by Maria Dunchie

In this book are eight outstanding messages on the kingdom of God. These messages were written by a group of writers, all involved in youth work. Throughout these readings you will find opportunities to share stories from your own life. Use them. They will give you a chance to show that what you are talking about is real and personal, not just something theoretical from Scripture.

To encourage interaction we have included discussion questions to be used at the end of each day's reading. These discussion questions are very important in the process of adapting and applying the lesson to their daily lives and can be found on page 91. They can be done together as a large group, or you can break down into smaller groups of 10-15; however, we are suggesting that you break into small, core groups of three to five persons and get together in these same small groups each night. Please remember that no two small groups will be the same. Each will have its own dynamic character, reflecting the varying characteristics of the members. The common thread running through the entire group will be Jesus Christ, and it is in His name that the group will meet each night of this special week.



Maria Dunchie is an Editorial Assistant in the Youth Ministries Department of the General Conference. She can be reached at dunchiem@gc.adventist.org.

Avoid the "Christianese" and theological terms. Stick to language young people will understand. Always remember: this week and all the discussion will mean nothing to them if they don't understand what you are saying.

Start your planning now!

Global Youth Day is set to launch the official week of the Youth Week of Prayer meetings. **Ahead of time, please contact your pastor or conference youth leader to see what projects your church will be involved in on this day, March 15.** After the Global Youth Day event, on the first night of your meetings, you may want to take some time to discuss or talk about the events that you just participated in.

So what is a Small Group Covenant (SGC)?

A Small Group Covenant is a set of promises about behavior to help foster a safe environment for spiritual exploration and provide relational ground rules. It is a very good way to help your groups affirm and remember their commonality. Creating a covenant together as a group will require that the members consciously and intentionally commit to growing with each other as Christians and will help in keeping the group healthy and focused.

Guidelines for creating a small group covenant can be found on the next page.

As you create your small group, keep in mind that churches are different and what may work for another church may not necessarily work for your church or youth group. Some groups may want to do a formal covenant that is typed and given to each member to sign and keep. Or you may choose to do an informal covenant such as a verbal agreement that you review orally when there are new members. ●

SMALL GROUP COVENANT GUIDELINES

page 96



COVENANT (sample)

page 97

Small Group Covenant (SGC) Guidelines to consider when creating a small group covenant for your youth group.

- 1. Purpose of the group:** To create a safe place for you to be yourself, wrestle with questions regarding your faith, and to be supported and encouraged in your walk with God. Also, to support one another in prayer and worship together so that group members glorify and honor God through their lives.
- 2. Duration** of the meeting (how long will the meeting be)
- 3. Time** and frequency of the meetings is set by church or youth leader.
- 4. Location:** Will the meetings be at the church, someone's house, or be on rotation?
- 5. Mission and Service:** We will serve the church and the community by encouraging the mutual discovery and application of talents and gifts so that group members embrace and serve people in families, their small groups, schools, churches, and community. Engaging in service is a way of learning together as well as giving.
- 6. Growth and development** "We will develop and grow by..."
- 7. Participation:** There are no "dumb questions." Everyone is given the right to their own opinion and all comments are encouraged and respected.
- 8. Spiritual growth:** We will endeavor to grow in mutual submission and in the application of spiritual truth, so that as a group, and individually, we can become more like Jesus in attitude and behavior.
- 9. Confidentiality:** Anything of a personal nature that is said in the meeting is not repeated outside the meeting.
- 10. Openness:** As we are able, we will be honest and forthright with one another. Non-judgment zone!
- 11. Accountability:** We give each other permission to hold each other accountable for the goals we set as a group or our personal pledges (you may want to document accountability pledges in a log book).
- 12. Graciousness:** We will not speak about a person when he or she is not present.
- 13. Courtesy:** When the group meets, we will come on time.
- 14. Relationship-building:** We will be honest and open with each other and pray for one another between meetings.
- 15. Community:** We will commit to join the global church in repositioning mission at the very heart of who we are and what we stand for as Christians (depending on what your acts of kindness were, you can use this time to debrief after the Global Youth Day event).
- 16. Roles and Responsibilities.** We will seek to share the following roles and responsibilities: Leader, co-leader, subgroup leaders (depending on the size of the group/church), host/hostess, prayer coordinator, Global Youth Day service project coordinator (you will need this if you will be using the Global Youth Day to launch your Youth Week of Prayer).

Some of the information on creating a small group covenant was adapted from the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church Small Group Ministry website: <http://data.mppc.org/files/communitylife/Sample%20Small%20Group%20Covenants.pdf>

A sample small group covenant can be found on the next page. Make copies for your church or use the guidelines above to create your own.

OUR SMALL GROUP COVENANT

I agree that this group exists as a safe place for me to be myself, wrestle with questions regarding my faith, and receive support and encouragement in my walk with God.

I agree to:

1. Support the members of my group in prayer and worship together so that we can all glorify and honor God through our lives.
2. Attend each small group meeting if at all possible, and, should I not be able to attend, to let the leader know in advance.
3. While not expecting or promising strict confidentiality within this group, I promise to be sensitive to the privacy needs of others and to be respectful of group members when speaking to others about what is said here.
4. Pray regularly for my fellow group members.
5. Be respectful of everyone's opinion. All questions will be encouraged and respected.
6. Keep my advice to the minimum.
7. Participate openly and honestly in group sessions and leave room for all members to share.
8. Not speak about group members when they are not present.
9. Do everything I can to support the global church in its mission to the world.

PRINT NAME

SIGNATURE

DATE

The Writing Team

Japhet De Oliveira serves as university chaplain at Andrews University, leading faith development on campus for students and supporting faculty and staff. He serves as senior pastor for the “One Place” community on campus. He is also an adjunct professor in youth ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He is co-founder of the One Project. He served as the **Writing Coordinator** for this project.

DAY 1

Kessia Reyne Bennett met Jesus as a teenager through a small Seventh-day Adventist Church in Washington State and, of course, He totally changed her life. While her secular family considered her new religion to be teenage rebellion, she found in it a vibrant community and a life calling. Kessia has served as a university chaplain, a local church pastor, a social media consultant, and an evangelist. She is currently pursuing a PhD

in theological studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

DAY 2

Padraic “Paddy” McCoy currently serves as the campus chaplain at Walla Walla University. Paddy earned his bachelor’s degree at Walla Walla University and his master’s in youth ministry from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. Before coming to Walla Walla University, Paddy served at Kettering College as recruiter and then campus chaplain, and he writes a regular column for *Insight* magazine, a youth magazine published by the Adventist church, and he hopes to eventually write books.

DAY 3

Tim Gillespie recently joined Loma Linda University Medical Center as the Faith Community and Health Liaison after serving as the young adult pastor at the Loma Linda University

Church since 2007. Prior to that, he had served as the Loma Linda Academy Chaplain. He also functions as the regional chaplain for Azusa Pacific University’s Regional Center in San Bernardino and the High Desert as director of chapel services.

DAY 4

Alex Bryan is senior pastor of the Walla Walla University Church; he also serves as adjunct professor in the schools of religion and business at Walla Walla University. Previously, he pastored churches in Tennessee and Georgia. The largest portion of his ministry (11 years) was spent planting and pastoring a church in Atlanta—a congregational mission to reach young adults disinclined to participate in traditional church settings.

DAY 5

Eddie Hypolite is a pastor, educational consultant, and motivational speaker. He travels internationally, preaching and

teaching in the areas of urban ministry, leadership, and youth and street culture. His vocational background is originally in the area of residential social work. He presently serves as the senior pastor of Avondale College Church in Australia, where he presently lives with his wife, Yvonne, and his daughter, Rhea.

DAY 6

Brandy Kirstein was pursuing a career as an actress when she attended an Amazing Facts Seminar and learned about the incredible love of Jesus and trustworthiness of Scripture and committed her life to Jesus Christ in December 1999. She served as a Bible worker for two years in various parts of the country before attending Southern Adventist University where she received her bachelor's in religious education. Brandy resumed her education and received a bachelor's in nursing and is currently working as a lactation counselor.

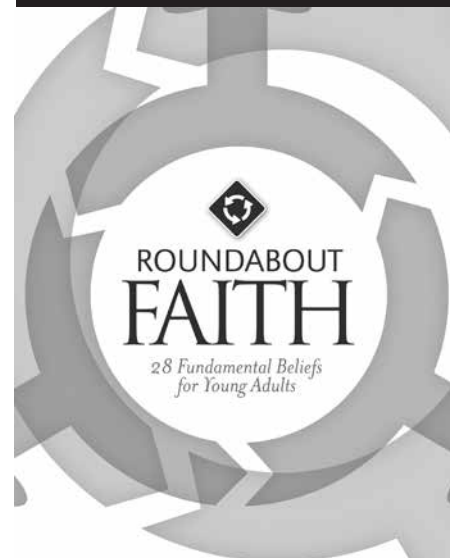
DAY 7

Dilys Brooks was born on the island of Jamaica. In her adolescent years she was drawn to the message of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and was baptized. She served as an educator both in Christian and public schools in New York City before being led to Andrews University. After her graduation, she accepted a call to serve as a campus chaplain at Loma Linda University.

DAY 8

Gilbert Cangy is a graduate of Avondale College, Australia. Gilbert pastored in the state of Victoria for six years before being called to be youth director in Sydney in 1993. In 1999, he was appointed as the youth ministry director for the South Pacific Division. In 2009, he asked for a change to pastor a local church in Sydney; while serving at this local church he was called to be the General Conference Youth Director in 2010. ●

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