

Jesus's Teachings: a summary of the Kingdom of God

by Brad Allen

Two thousand years later, Jesus's words and teachings are unique, insightful, and boldly speak of things larger than us. During his three years of intensive ministry, Jesus taught with audacious authority. A temple soldier summed up Jesus with the comment, "No one ever spoke like this man." But over the ensuing two millennia his teachings, although still available in the original four eyewitness accounts, have been pared, added to, edited, and generally diluted with creeds, doctrines, traditions, folklore, and culturally-centric dogma. It is refreshing to review his words alone, as presented in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, searching for the essential messages he taught.

Through a series of travels, sermons, parables, and demonstrated lessons, Jesus showed us a kingdom based on a simple set of truths which are applicable throughout all time. He spoke in Aramaic and Hebrew so his words, captured in written Greek, were already translated by the original gospel writers. If his words are meant for all people of all ages, nations, and languages, surely God would know that 99.999% of the readers would not hear his words in their original language. It would thus be unnecessary and futile to search for hidden meanings in his words when the overt message comprehensively covers the spiritual needs of all people. Jesus criticizes the temple leaders for spending too much time delving into hidden truths. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."

The Kingdom of God

Jesus spoke frequently about the supreme role of God and that he, Jesus, is both the son of God and is God himself. He quoted prophecies from the Jewish scriptures and claimed they pointed directly to him. He did not attempt to explain the complexity of being both a son and God while being one, but seemed to accept that it was either unnecessary or too complex for his audience to understand. Time and again people around him reacted emotionally and even violently to his claim that he was God. They said such things as "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus was clear and repetitive on who he is.

Jesus bore witness to a new era, a Kingdom of God (or "of heaven") which would usher in a new covenant between God and man. He spoke of this Kingdom of God coming through him and being fully ushered in with his ascension into heaven, mystifying his audience. He told how God's kingdom would extend through the end of time and beyond into eternity. Although his kingdom includes a celestial "place", he refers to as heaven, it also clearly includes those with faith in him now, on earth, and will transcend to a "new earth", the timing and details of which he said no one knows but God.

Jesus asks us to believe in him; believe that he is both the son of God and God, and that he can forgive sins. Knowing what is true and doing what is right are key components of the way Jesus asks us to live, but on their own they get us only "close to the Kingdom of God". Faith in Jesus is required for entry. With faith we are "born again" and enter the Kingdom of Heaven, his realm which includes this day and age but also stretches to the eternal. Those who choose not to enter the Kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ, are subject to judgment which will not go well for them, as their sins have not been forgiven and they will be held accountable for each one. He said, "I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

Sharply contrasted to the Jewish leaders' teachings, Jesus required little for entrance into his kingdom. He responded to simple expressions that he was the Christ with assurances of salvation. "Your sins are forgiven" covered everything the law did, but simply with faith.

How Jesus said we should live

Jesus asks us to use our faith to drive a sincere righteousness, one that comes from within, from our heart. Jesus says the Kingdom of God does not remove from the commandments of the Old Testament, but in his teachings he re-interprets many of them such that they focus on love, humility, and service instead of obedience or ceremony.

First, we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He states this as his greatest commandment and that it requires belief and faith in him. Jesus lays out a construct where we must never replace God with anything or in any way. He and his name are always treated as holy.

Jesus condemns the approach of the Jewish leaders of the time, challenging the ways they judged peoples' works and actions instead of the motives in their hearts. He challenged the need for earthly religious authority in his kingdom. The laws of the sabbath are frequent clashes in this battle with Jesus saying "the sabbath is made for man, not man for the sabbath". The Jewish leaders used the sabbath to oppress people and elevate themselves. Jesus presents the sabbath as a time for good works, rest, enjoyment of each other, and other worship of God; special days for his kingdom, not to be burdened by the authorities of religion. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus's second great commandment is exceedingly simple yet extraordinarily far reaching. He speaks of all people together, every human being as our neighbor who we are to love as much as we love ourselves. There is no allowance for tribe, nation, or race, all are to be treated as family. Jesus was not a Pollyanna, recognized that we have enemies, and taught that we should love them as well. We are to turn the other cheek when confronted with anger, hate, or violence. Love requires a humble approach

as servants and insists that we judge no one for any reason. Jesus specifically brought new light to old commandments, extending them to greater meaning and sincerity.

Jesus shows that God does not look merely at our actions, but also the motives, thoughts, and feelings behind them. An angry word to another person, to God, is the equivalent of murder. "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Jesus teaches a rigid respect for women and marriage. By repeated examples he shows men are to respect women both physically and in motive. With the exception of wives, women are not to be looked at with sexual intention. Marriage was created by God and, although divorce is allowed, divorce followed by marriage to another person is wrong for both men and women.

A faithful person is assumed not to take that which does not belong to them and Jesus extends this further. Withholding help from the poor or money for God's work are both considered stealing and equally distasteful to God as taking individually from another person.

Jesus stands for an upright and transparent representation of who we are at all times. "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." God can see our motives and our actions must be consistent with what is in our hearts. "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." Hypocrisy, when our actions, good or bad, are backed by motives inconsistent with God's kingdom, is regularly condemned by Jesus.

"Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Wealth is a hindrance to faith. "It is especially difficult for rich people to enter "the kingdom of heaven". Although God may not hold us to it, we must be committed to give up our possessions when we enter the kingdom of God. Possessions are directly tied to visible expressions of status, highly contrary to the simple, poor life Jesus lived and asks of us. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and it is extremely hard to be poor in spirit when we are wealthy with possessions. He extends the concept of coveting far beyond wanting what others have to desiring wealth in general.

Our responsibilities in the Kingdom of God

Jesus's message carries responsibility. We are to forgive others or God will not forgive us. Jesus personalizes the things we do for good. Each act, such as helping the poor, we ultimately do for him. He says that "not everyone who pronounces Jesus's name will enter the kingdom of heaven but the one who does the will of God." Faith is not a one-time act but a life-style in the Kingdom of God.

"...you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." His warning to the Jewish leaders is a warning to us today. Generally Jesus speaks of the "church" synonymously with members of the kingdom of God. Jesus says he will build his church on Peter and refers (in Matthew 18) to a body of people that might hint to something like a corporate church. He sends his apostles and disciples out to build a kingdom, not an institution.

In some aspects Jesus's teaching is as distinctive for what he did not talk about or was not recorded, as it is for what is included. He never mentions the creation story, the church as an administrative body, or holy texts beyond the Jewish scriptures of the time. He does not appear to require complex dogma, orthodoxy, or structure in his kingdom. He looks for each member of his kingdom to act with love, minding our own actions not those of others.

"If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you."

Very clearly Jesus presents prayer as a private and simple affair between us and God. "When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." He followed this with a simple prayer we now call "the Lord's Prayer". His teachings on the results of prayer are complex and hard to understand. He repeatedly taught that God would answer prayers and the results were increased with a larger faith. Yet he also showed how significant prayers were not answered to further the Kingdom of God, including his own prayer to be relieved of the burden involved in his death and resurrection.

Jesus's Kingdom of God is in this world. He recognized the roles of kings, rulers, and authority. He taught we are to respect that authority, paying taxes and following laws. Jesus reserved his criticism for the religious authorities and he twice disrupted their use of commerce, taxation, and unjust money changing in the temple. Jesus asks us to live at peace with this world, not in rebellion or as separatists. When Pilate asked

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered him with, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."

The simple impact of Jesus

Jesus taught a simple yet impactful message of faith, love, and righteousness. His kingdom has come and our following his commandments is a simple and joyful act, not complex or onerous. Our world, his physical creation, is to live in and enjoy. This is the first step to our journey in the Kingdom, not to the Kingdom. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

Two thousand years later it remains that "no one ever spoke like this man".

notes:

Jesus's quotes are from the English Standard translation of the four gospels