

July 9 Lesson: The Kingdom Has Come Upon You

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of July 9, 2023
By Jay Harris**

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 12:22-32

Key Verse: *But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.* (Matthew 12:28)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce Unit 2 which focuses on the Reign of God through the words and actions of Jesus
- To relate the concept of “realized eschatology” to the kingdom coming to Jesus’ followers
- To explore the nature of the healing, act of deliverance, and kingdom sign that Jesus performed
- To walk through the conversation/argument against Jesus and Jesus’ attempt to redirect it
- To consider the relation between the movement of God’s Spirit and the presence of God’s Reign
- To observe how Jesus challenged people to declare their allegiance and renounce evil
- To define blasphemy against the Holy Spirit
- To consider ways that those who are not against Jesus are for him

Introduction to the 2nd Unit: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

The summer quarter’s theme is the “righteous reign of God.” We said at the outset that this theme presents one of the grand themes of the Bible. The topic of the reign of God comes up again and again in various forms and contexts throughout the Bible. We see the idea developing as we move through the Bible. It is such a big topic that it will take every lesson in the study to begin to understand its theological dimensions, and then we will feel as if we are just scratching the surface.

In our first unit, we began exploring this theme from the perspective of the Old Testament prophets. In this second unit, we will look at how Jesus envisions the kingdom. We are using the terms “kingdom of God” and “reign of God” interchangeably. Both terms refer to the same reality. Using the terms interchangeably reminds us that the kingdom of God is not a static place, but a dynamic reality—and a movement. The term “reign of God” captures the dynamic nature of God’s rule breaking into the world.

Think about the differences we might anticipate between the perspective of the prophets compared to the perspective we will get from Jesus. The prophets were allowed to see divinely inspired visions of God's *future* reign. With Jesus, we are talking about the Word made flesh and dwelling among us full of grace and truth (John 1). What Jesus says about the kingdom of God not only has a future focus, but also a focus in the *present-day* context of Jesus' earthly ministry. In Jesus, there is an "already, but not yet" quality about the kingdom of God.

Introduction to this Lesson's Theme: The Kingdom Has Come Upon you

The theological term for the already-but-not-yet quality of Jesus' kingdom ministry is "realized eschatology." Eschatology is the theological study of the end-times. Eschatology refers to the time in the future when God's ideal will be achieved in all of its fulness. With Jesus, we can talk about a "realized eschatology," because in Jesus we see a representation of God's ideal being lived out in a person and in the circumstances that he was creating on earth. In Jesus, the *end* was being *realized*, at least in part, in the present-day.

We will study the quote "the kingdom has come upon you," or "the kingdom has come to you," depending upon the version of the Bible you read. They essentially mean the same thing. In Jesus, there is a sense in which the kingdom was present among the followers of Jesus during his earthly ministry. An unprecedented opportunity was being given to them. It is important that we reflect on the how the reign of God was present within the orbit of Jesus while God's Messiah, God's Son, was on earth in the flesh.

How was God's reign breaking into their reality? It is also important to understand that Jesus' followers were being given "glimpses" or "tastes" of God's heavenly reign. There was the "already" part that they were experiencing, but there was also a "not yet" quality. The "not yet" means that there was definitely more to come. They were not yet experiencing the complete fulness of God's reign.

It is so important for believers to sense when the kingdom has come to us or upon us. We take note of what we are experiencing that can only be of God. We take note of the times when we see a glimpse of God's perfect ideal in our midst. Experiences like this give us hope and encouragement and the strength to persevere. Experiences like this also show us that for which we are striving and that to which we are dedicated. When we see pictures of God's ideal, we know better how to align our values, our priorities, our behaviors, and our purposes. We also come away from these experiences knowing that this is only a foretaste, and there is more to be experienced. There is the "not yet."

What are examples in the gospels where the reign of God was breaking into the lives of his followers? Can you think of examples in your own experience where you felt you saw a glimpse of the reign of God in your midst? How did the experience encourage you?

Exploring the Nature of the Healing, Act of Deliverance, and Kingdom Sign that Jesus Performed

In the scripture passage we are studying, we will read a conversation that presents a running argument. Let's be clear about what we mean by "argument." The conversation ensued after Jesus had cured a man. On the Pharisees side of the conversation, it is fair to say that they were being argumentative. They were arguing with Jesus to discredit him. Jesus, by contrast, was not being argumentative as much as he was building a logical argument to enlighten the Pharisees and the audience who heard the conversation. Arguments can either create heat, or they can shed light. The Pharisees were trying to create heat, but Jesus was trying to shed light.

22 Then they brought to Jesus a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see.

As we unpack this event, we realize first that this is a dramatic story of a man whose eyesight and speech were healed. Jesus opened this man's world in more ways than one. The difference in how this man would be able to function in daily life would be dramatic. The man would go from being dependent on others to being more in charge of his own life. Also, the stigma that placed this man on the margins of society was removed.

The crowds witnessed a miracle. Miracles in the gospels were never performed just to produce a spectacle. One thing you could say is that these miracles were acts of love. In our scripture lesson, Jesus met a real need in the man's life and improved his life. The other thing we need to note about this miracle, and all the miracles that Jesus did, is that they were intended to be signs of God's kingdom. God's ideal for the man in our scripture was being restored in him. In this sense, it was a present-day sign of God's reign in heaven, which was breaking into the world in which people lived.

This event was also being described as an act of spiritual deliverance. We're told that the man was demon-possessed. Was that supposed to explain the reason for his blindness and inability to speak? Was it a common understanding that all who suffered physiological maladies such as this were demon-possessed? Would this kind of understanding be a cause for the stigma that society attached to people who suffered from such conditions? Would the stigma not compound their suffering?

Perhaps, the understanding was that not all who were blind and mute were demon-possessed, but this man was. Perhaps, Jesus was addressing the situation of his day from what would have been a common frame of reference. Perhaps, a larger point is being made about all suffering being a part of the world's fallen condition. If this latter is the case, then we know that the reign of God is about reversing the effects of the Fall and returning all of creation to its original state of goodness and perfection—like the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. If this is the case, then it is appropriate to look at the coming of God's reign in terms of spiritual forces at war with one another.

We are not required to have all these questions figured out to accept all that is being taught in this scripture passage. It is important, however, to ponder the reign of God in terms of spiritual forces at war with one another and to understand Jesus' role in it. This is important because it forms the backdrop of what is said in this conversation.

Have you ever pondered life from the perspective of spiritual forces at work, both good and bad? How do you think it impacts your life knowing that the reign of God is actively working against evil powers in this world?

The Argument For and Against Jesus

The sign that Jesus performed created a reaction from the crowd that deserves our attention and our examination.

²³ All the crowds were amazed and were saying, “Can this be the Son of David?”

No wonder that the crowds were amazed. More than that, they wondered out loud whether or not Jesus could be the Son of David, which was code for being the promised Messiah—the one anointed to sit on the throne reserved for the promised Son of David next to the throne of God. The crowds were making a connection between Jesus’ ability to do the miraculous and Jesus being the Messiah. They were connecting the restoring of this man’s sight and speech to the coming of God’s reign. They were connecting Jesus’ ability to subdue the spiritual forces of evil to Jesus’ role in the coming of God’s reign.

How do you think you would have felt being in the crowd that witnessed a miracle like this and then started asking if Jesus was the Messiah?

As much as the idea thrilled the crowds, it angered the religious leaders. They saw Jesus and the crowd’s response to him both as a threat to their orthodoxy and a threat to their position of influence and power over the people. So, they went on the attack.

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this man casts out the demons.”

Rather than recognize the wonderful healing that had just happened to this man, or debate the possible connection between Jesus’ deeds and the expectations regarding the coming Messiah, they went as low as they could go. They went straight to an *ad hominem* argument. In this type of argument, you attack the character of the person with whom you are engaging in an argument. You do not attack them a little. You rush to the bottom and go straight to the accusation that Jesus is the servant of the devil. They said Jesus is able to cast out demons because he is working for their ruler.

Ad hominem arguments are the weakest because you’re avoiding addressing someone's argument or position. Instead, you irrelevantly attack the person or some aspect of the person who is making the argument. Not only is this kind of argument weak, but it is also mean.

Jesus did not respond in kind by attacking their character. Instead, Jesus responded by taking their argument and showing its weaknesses.

²⁵ Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. ²⁶ If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how, then, will his kingdom stand?”

The Pharisees’ argument was weak because it does not make sense for Satan to employ Jesus in subduing Satan’s own forces. Satan would not give Jesus any help in dividing his kingdom—Satan’s sphere of influence. The spiritual forces at God’s command are working to undo the effects of a fallen world. Jesus was healing people and delivering them from the forces at work in a fallen world. So, why would Satan hire Jesus to hasten the dividing and undoing of Satan’s own sphere of influence? The only answer is that Jesus could not be working for Satan.

²⁷ If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges.

Exorcisms were practiced legitimately by certain Jewish priests according to the Law of Moses. It was an acceptable and often enough used practice. If Jewish exorcists heard the explanation that the Pharisees were using for how exorcisms work, they would say, “Wait a minute, that’s not how this works.” They would say that exorcisms are the work of God, not Satan. The guild of exorcists and centuries of tradition would be the judges in determining the viability of the Pharisees’ argument.

Why do you think the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power given to him by the ruler of demons?

The Relation Between the Spirit of God and the Reign of God

To this point, Jesus has dealt a blow to the argument used by the Pharisees. Since the Pharisees had attacked him, Jesus was defending his own credibility. Jesus intended to go further, however, than defending himself. Jesus wanted to show the reasons and implications for casting out demons.

²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

If Jesus’ ability to cast out demons did not come from Satan, then it had to come from God. Casting out demons was part of the movement of the Spirit of God in their midst. If the Spirit of God was moving in this way, then they needed to consider that the kingdom of God was coming to them. If Jesus was casting out demons as a part of a greater movement of God’s Spirit, then the Pharisees’ focus on discrediting Jesus was missing the larger point. If the kingdom of God was coming to them, why were the Pharisees focused on preserving their own power, influence, and privileges? If the reign of God was breaking into the world in their midst, why would anyone focus on anything else?

²⁹ Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.

In this illustration, Satan is the strong man who is being tied up by Jesus. In this illustration, Satan's house was being entered and his property was being plundered by Jesus. In this running argument with the Pharisees, Jesus has turned the tables. If Jesus is not working with the devil, then Jesus is working against the devil. Jesus wanted his audience to visualize Jesus tying up the devil so Jesus could enter the devil's house and plunder it. Moreover, this is not some random act. This work that Jesus was doing was part of the larger work that the Spirit of God was doing in the world to bring in the reign of God.

What are some instances where you could visualize Jesus binding up Satan? Have you ever thought of Jesus working in this way? Is there a place for us to join Jesus in this work? What would opportunities should we be seizing?

Choosing Allegiances

If Jesus is working with the Spirit of God and against the devil, then the subject of people's allegiances becomes very important. Jesus has been making the case that his work is part of a larger movement of the Spirit of God. With whom are the members of Jesus' audience going to align themselves? With whom are we going to align ourselves?

³⁰ Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Jesus was in effect asking his audience to choose sides. On one side is Jesus, who is 1) casting out demons, 2) delivering people from spiritual bondage 3) in alignment with the Spirit of God moving in the world, 4) working against the evil one, and 5) bringing in the reign of God. On the other side is the evil one, who is opposed to the reign of God and whose desire is to bring people into spiritual bondage.

What this leaves is a window of opportunity and an invitation. The Pharisees and the members of the crowd were being urged by Jesus to choose allegiances. In this context, Jesus was not permitting neutral ground. One has to decide, at some point, to be with Jesus or he or she is against Jesus.

In the United Methodist Church, in 1989, a new hymnal was published that included a new baptism ritual. The new ritual connected our denomination with other denominations, representing the larger church that had been sharing a similar ritual. The ritual added some words to the familiar call to repent of our sins when we make our profession of faith in Jesus. The ritual says,

*On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:
Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?*

Notice that a person is being asked not only to repent of their sin, but also being asked to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness and reject the evil powers of this world. This brought our baptism ritual back to its foundations in the Early Church and the New Testament Church. It falls in line very much with the content and tone of the scripture we are studying.

I am sure that you have repented of your sin before, but when in your life have you gone on record saying that you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness and reject the evil powers of this world? Do you take the opportunity to reaffirm this when this ritual is used in your church, in the cases where someone comes for baptism, makes their profession of faith, or brings their children for baptism? Has your church ever used the service in the United Methodist hymnal that is intended for the remembrance of one's baptism?

The baptism ritual goes on to present the other side of the coin—a positive affirmation once we have rejected the evil powers of this world. In addition to what we are renouncing, what are we accepting?

*Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?*

When we reject the evil powers of this world, we are able to accept the freedom and power God gives us to continue in the ongoing struggle of resisting evil, injustice, and oppression. Notice that the ritual is open-ended in that it gets us to contemplate whatever forms evil, injustice, and oppression present themselves. Jesus enlists his followers to be a part of the resistance against the devil. All who call themselves Christian are being recruited to help bind up the strong man leading the evil forces in our fallen world that Christ is working to redeem.

How do you think evil, injustice, and oppression present themselves in the world and in your life? How do you resist these forces and the behaviors associated with them? How do you work to undo their effects in the world? How are you at accepting the freedom and power God gives you to join Christ in this work?

In the ritual of baptism, it is after the renunciation of sin and evil that we make our confession of faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior.

*Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?*

Notice that the baptism ritual links us with the world-wide movement that is the Church. It is good to contemplate the relationship between the one, holy, apostolic, and catholic (universal) Church, on the one hand, with the reign of God, on the other hand. The Church is not the kingdom, but the Church is enlisted to point people to the reign of God. The Church was founded by Jesus Christ on the bedrock foundation of all who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior as the

apostle Peter, when Jesus asked Peter who Peter believed Jesus was. When Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said he would build his church on this confession and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. “The Church is of God will be preserved until the end of time,” as one ritual says.

This being said, the Church is not the kingdom. The Church exists to point others to the reign of God, to recruit people into the reign of God, and to be co-workers with Christ in the work of bringing the reign of God into the world. In short, the reign of God, or kingdom of God, is bigger than the Church. The Church on earth will be preserved until the end of time, and then the true Church will be taken into the kingdom of God. Remembering that the Church is not the kingdom reminds us that the Church is not perfect, but the reign of God is perfect. The Church is called to be a better and better sign of the kingdom of God.

This is why Jesus not only says, “whoever is not with me is against me,” he also says, “whoever does not gather with me scatters.” The Church and all who align themselves with Jesus are in the position of gathering others to Jesus. Conversely, all who are not with Jesus find themselves in the position of scattering people away from Jesus and are therefore working against Jesus, consciously or unconsciously. With whom we align ourselves affects those within our sphere of influence.

How would you describe the differences between the Church and the Kingdom of God? How can and should the Church be more oriented to the reign of God? What difference would this make in the Church? What difference would this make in the world?

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

While the window of opportunity remains open there is an invitation. What Jesus says next reminds us that this is no casual invitation.

³¹ Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

The religious leaders who were opposed to Jesus charged that Jesus and his followers were guilty of blasphemy. When Jesus used this word in this particular conversation, Jesus was using one of their words in relation to them. Note that Jesus wanted to make a distinction between speaking a word against Jesus and speaking against the Holy Spirit. Jesus was saying that speaking a word against him was forgivable, but not against the Holy Spirit.

People were on the fence about Jesus, but if they determined that Jesus was a part of the movement of God’s Spirit, then it was no longer Jesus with whom they had a quarrel. If they could not rule out that Jesus was moving in alignment with the Holy Spirit, and they were still opposed to Jesus, then they were committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Blasphemy

against Jesus was forgivable while they were still deciding, but blasphemy against the Spirit of God was not forgivable.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not an offense one commits easily. It happens not with the slip of the tongue. It does not happen as a result of a small doctrinal dispute. It happens not with a sin of the flesh.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees, who were committed to holiness and following the Law of Moses, to consider that they, of all people, might be setting themselves against the Holy Spirit and the movement of the Spirit in the world in bringing in the reign of God. The Pharisees of Jesus' day, of all people, might have been committing the kind of blasphemy that counts the most. Jesus wanted them to remain open-minded like Nicodemus, for instance, who was well on his way toward becoming a follower.

What effect would it have on the Pharisees for Jesus to use the word “blasphemy” in connection with their rejection of the movement of the Spirit of God? How might we be more in tune with the Spirit of God in our lives and in the life of the Church?

Jesus Welcomes All Who Will Follow

Students on the Bible might pick up on the fact that scripture seems to hold two opposing positions to be true. One of those positions is stated in the scripture we have been studying. The other position is found in another gospel.

Whoever is not with me is against me. (Matthew 12:30)

Whoever is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:40)

How can both of these be true? Can we admit this might be confusing? When we look at both of these scriptures in their context, not only can they both be true—they can reinforce each other.

The first of these statements, as we have been saying, permits no neutral ground *in the end*. The context for saying whoever is not with Jesus is against Jesus is in the arena of deciding where our allegiances lie. We must come to the point where we decide for ourselves whom we will follow in life. Whoever is not with Jesus is against Jesus. The focus is our own decision. When it comes to others, we do not make the determination of who is against Jesus and who is not. God makes that determination.

The other statement comes from a situation in Mark 9:38-41. The disciple John went to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” Jesus told John and the other disciples, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” This not only applied to those who were casting demons in Jesus' name. Jesus said, “For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” Jesus was enlisting to his mission

as many as he could get. The mission was not limited to the twelve disciples. If they were not against Jesus, he considered them to be for him.

Serving the reign of God was and is an inclusive mission. In this kind of situation, people may even engage in the mission of Jesus without thinking of it at first as the mission of Jesus. At first, they may be thinking about serving their fellow human beings. They see the difference they are making in people's lives. They are experiencing the incredibly good feelings associated with this work. They are experiencing a fulfillment, satisfaction, joy, and peace that they have never felt before. In this case, the reign of God is breaking into people's lives in a way that helps brings them to a decision to follow Christ.

This is how the Spirit of God moves.

How might God want us to recognize and affirm people who are working with and for the Lord who are members of another denomination or group? How might God want us to welcome and lead those who do not yet identify as being Christian but are engaged in activities that we would associate with the reign of God?

What are your top takeaways from this lesson?

Prayer

Gracious God, You sent your Son into the world to perform signs and to be a sign of your reign in the world. Give us the means to pay greater attention both to evil forces at work in a fallen world and the movement of Your Spirit in the world, so that we might be obedient to Your Spirit and use the freedom and power you give us to combat evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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