

On Earth as It Is in Heaven

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-14 (NRSV) *Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*

In this "Kingdom of Heaven" series of sermons, we've said there are no guarantees, no quick fixes; it's a long-term deal—maybe several generations. But it has to start somewhere.

If we want to know what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, look to Jesus. He taught, and he lived, the kingdom. Essentially, the kingdom is characterized by a non-violent response to violence—a proactive approach of unconditional love. The kingdom of the world lives by a "myth of redemptive violence"—the idea that evil can be eradicated from the earth by violence: just destroy it.

Jesus' way, by contrast, is to "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you*" (LUKE 6:27-28). Paul, writing almost a generation later, wrote, "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*" (ROMANS 12:21 NRSV).

The kingdom of the world says, "It can't be done." The truth is, it's hardly ever been tried; but, in those rare instances in which it has been tried, it was effective. If you want to follow up on that, look at the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela; read Walther Wink's book, *The Powers that Be*.

And along that same line, Abraham Lincoln said, "The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend."

If the myth of redemptive violence is effective; why have we not seen a reduction in violence and retaliation? Instead, violence and retaliation begets more of the same; and in our own life-times we have seen violence and retaliation accelerating at a frightening rate. It has been tried—over and over—for centuries! It doesn't work!

Maybe our problem is that we're looking for something that "works."

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon note that the radical teachings of

Jesus' are not a "strategy for achieving a better society"— Jesus didn't come to tweak the kingdom of the world. His teachings are a sign, a vision of the in-breaking of a new society; something so new, so contradictory to what we have heard, that we no longer can rely on our older images of what is and what is not.¹

What's more, while the kingdom of the world is centered on what "works" to achieve one's self-interests, Jesus' radical teachings are concerned with something entirely different. Hauerwas and Willimon write:

"The basis for the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is not what works but rather the character of God. Cheek-turning is not advocated because it works (it usually doesn't), but because this is the way God is: kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. This is not a strategy for getting what we want but the only way of life available, now that, in Jesus, we have seen what God is. We seek reconciliation with the neighbor, not because we feel so much better afterward, but because reconciliation is what God is doing in the world through Christ."

This is simply who God is. This is what God is up to in the world. "God is love" (I John 4:8), and living consistent with God's character, or, to put it another way, following Jesus and becoming more like him, is simply what it means to submit to God's reign, and live in the kingdom of heaven.

And remember: Jesus didn't talk about the kingdom of heaven only as something in another time and another dimension. He said, "The kingdom is at hand—it's here!" and he said, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21), where the "you" is plural: "The kingdom is within y'all—or among y'all—or in the midst of y'all."

Wherever people choose peace over violence and forgiveness over retaliation, wherever people act in the interest of others rather than only out of self-interest, the kingdom of God is present. Wherever people choose violence, retaliation, and self-interest, there is the kingdom of the world—even when such action is understandable or "justified" by kingdom-of-the-world standards.

The way of living under God's reign is shocking and impractical in kingdom of the world standards, but it is the only way that is in harmony with the character of God, in concert with what God is doing in the world, and, thus, the only way that manifests God's reign.²

Conservative religious people involved in kingdom-of-the-world thinking often believe that their enemies are the liberals, the gay activists, the ACLU, the pro-choice advocates, the evolutionists, and so on.

On the opposite side, liberal religious people often think their enemies are the fundamentalists, the gay bashers, the Christian Coalition, the antiabortionists,

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in a Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), Page 62. Quoted in Boyd, Gregory A. *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (p. 42-43). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

² Boyd, *Ibid.*, p. 44.

and so on.

Demonizing one's enemies is part of the tit-for-tat game of Babylon. That's the only way one can justify animosity, and even violence, toward them.

What we have here is not the kingdom of the world versus the kingdom of God. What we have are two different religious versions of the kingdom-of-the-world going at each other. If we can get in the mindset of the kingdom of God, we realize none of those people—in either list—are people kingdom-of-God citizens are called to fight against. They are, however, people we are called to fight for.

Our battle is "not against flesh and blood," whether they are right wing or left wing, gay or straight, pro-choice or pro-life, liberal or conservative, democratic or communist, American or Iraqi. Our battle is against the "cosmic powers and principalities" that hold these people, and us, in bondage.

Whatever our own opinions about how the kingdom of the world should run, whatever political or ethical views we may embrace, our one task as kingdom-of-God disciples is to fight for people, and the way we do it is by doing exactly what Jesus did. He defeated the cosmic powers of darkness by "living a countercultural life characterized by outrageous love, and by laying down his life for his enemies."³

We also help defeat these "cosmic powers and principalities" that hold people in bondage when we refuse to condemn, and instead extend grace; when we let go of anger, and instead give ourselves for them in loving service.

A person may win by kingdom-of-the-world standards, but lose by the standards that count eternally. The world—and in too many cases, the church—are engulfed in an "I'm right" syndrome. Jesus taught that there will be many who seem to believe the right things and do the right things in his name, but whom he will renounce; because they didn't love him by loving the homeless, the hungry, the poor, and the prisoner (Matt. 7:21-23; 25:41-46; cf. Luke 6:46-49).

We can possess all the right kingdom-of-the-world opinions on the planet and stand for all the right kingdom-of-the-world causes, but if we don't look like Jesus carrying his cross to Golgotha—sacrificing our time, energy, and resources for others—*"Even if I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing"* (I CORINTHIANS 13:1-3 NRSV).

However "right" we may be, without love we are simply displaying a religious version of the kingdom of the world, not the kingdom of God.⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 48-50 ~ This entire page is a paraphrase and an adaptation of these two pages.