

A CULTURE OF SERVICE

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Kingdom Rules

It may be hip, it may be cool, it may be liberal, it may be eco-friendly, it may be 21st Century, but the only valid reason for a Christian culture of service is this: Jesus said, *"If you want to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven, learn to be the servant of all."*

Jesus told us to *"Seek first the Kingdom of God"* (Matthew 6:33), and He taught us to pray to God, *"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven"* (Matthew 6:10).

What does that mean? How does God's Kingdom come? Take a moment to think about what the answer to that prayer would look like?

One by One

One way that God's Kingdom comes is through individual moments and decisions. For instance, Jesus told Nicodemus, a Jewish religious teacher, *"I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God"* (John 3:3).

Although Jesus Christ hung and died on a cross to take away the sin and guilt of *all* humankind, it is only as *each individual* surrenders to Christ as Savior and Lord that that person is born again and enters the Kingdom of God.

Yet that is only the beginning.

Through many more individual moments and decisions, day after day, we choose to live as subjects of the Kingdom of God, or not.

For the Kingdom of God is not simply a geographical location, it is particularly a spiritual alignment. God's Kingdom is everywhere that God's reign is acknowledged and active. Wherever God is actively in charge is where His Kingdom is present.

My entering His Kingdom (your entering His Kingdom) is a function of my yielding to His leadership. Not only the first time, but every time.

It is the equivalent to choosing to walk in the Spirit or in the flesh. Doing God's will or doing my own. Without the active surrender of my will to God's, his Kingdom cannot come.

Living In-Between

We live in this peculiar "in-between time," when the Kingdom of God is already, but not yet.

Jesus said, *"If I am casting out demons by the power of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you"* (Luke 11:20). And He did so.

Yet, on His last night with His disciples before His death, He also said, *"I will not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God has come"* (Luke 22:18).

Since the time of Jesus, when the Kingdom of God first began to appear in the Earth, until now, God's Kingdom is both here and yet to come. That is, it is here only partially and periodically. It overlaps and seeps into our world at times and in degrees, in response to individual moments and decisions of faith, but is yet to be seen in its glorious fullness, when this world has been replaced with a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1).

For this in-between time, as the Kingdom of God is overflowing and leaking into our world, Jesus has said, *"If you want to be great in God's Kingdom, learn to be the servant of all"* (Mark 9:35)

Servant of All

What did He mean? Certainly serving means thinking of others and endeavoring to meet their needs, but the most important word in His instruction just may be the imperative verb "learn." Serving others simply does not come naturally to anyone; at least, not continuously and not for "all." Therefore, if we are to obey Jesus, we must *learn* to overthrow our self-interest and self-will. This will involve trial-and-error and much effort and intentionality. But it can be done. And it is key to significance in the Kingdom life.

Learning to Be

On the National Day of Prayer, 1993, during prayer around City Hall, the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart, "I want you to pray and support the police department." I began to pray for their safety and effectiveness, asking God how I could personally support them.

Two years later, the San Rafael Police Department approached our ministers' fellowship, asking for a police chaplaincy to be established. The primary focus of the Chaplaincy is to serve the spiritual and emotional needs of the members of the department and their families; our secondary service is to the citizens of the City, as they interface with the police.

Ten years later, we began to reach out to Coleman Elementary School, offering to serve in any way they needed; we planted trees and pulled weeds, we volunteered at their International Festival, we read to their students, and tutored kids after school. They did not reject us because of our faith. They responded favorably and rejoiced at our willingness. Today, they are asking for more.

This year, a loose association of Marin churches came together to offer a Gift of Love to the County. Over 400 volunteers turned out to clean up the open spaces and parks, pull weeds and plant trees. Our service had profound impact: twice as many volunteers turned out as we had expected, and they gave three times as much cash as we expected to help renovate a County playground, and we received very positive reception by the representatives of the County. In two weeks we will present a check for \$10,000 to the County Board of Supervisors for that playground.

Speaking Their Language

Last week, as we reflected on the success of that event, one of my colleagues remarked that the reaction was so positive because "we were speaking the County's 'love language'" (referring to the book, "The Five Love Languages," by Gary Chapman). He meant that we were delivering our love in a manner that they could understand and receive.

And I thought, and said to the pastors in the room, “Perhaps it is not Marin County that has been ‘hard’ for the Church to reach, but the Church who has been hard-hearted — self-absorbed, isolated, theologically arrogant, and insisting that evangelism be done “our way.”

Doors of relationship and communication open when we speak the community’s language, when we meet their sense of need.

We Must Go

All of this has led me to reflect on something the Apostle Paul wrote concerning the presentation of the Gospel message:

Romans 10:14 *How can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? ¹⁵ And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent?*

Notice, he did not ask “Who will tell them if they don’t *come*?”

Jesus *commanded* us to *go*: go into the highways and byways, go into all the world, go and make disciples from among all peoples. When you leave here today, where will you go?

Social or Spiritual

The late 19th and early 20th Centuries saw the rise of what was called by some the “social gospel” — the application of Christian principles to social problems, such as poverty inequality, racism, and education.

You will find it, among other lofty goals, in this purpose statement of the Presbyterian Church, from 1910: “The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”

Although it was originally seen as but one tenet of the Church’s responsibility, in many cases it actually led to the substitution of social work for evangelistic work, creating a rift in the church.

Many Christians opted to do “what only the Church can do,” which is preach Christ, and leave the social work to the government. This launched the rise of the Evangelical Movement. This also widened the gap between church and state, and between liberals and conservatives, and branded the Church as “out of touch, indifferent, and irrelevant.”

Yet, we have found that we have the greatest reception when we speak in a language our community understands, and that clearly means actions first.

In the 21st Century, we don’t need another “social gospel” to replace evangelism, but we need to develop an “evangelistic culture of service.” Jesus said, “*The Son of Man (Jesus) came not to be served, but to serve others*” (Matthew 20:28).

Evangelistic Culture

An evangelistic culture of service will meet human needs as it finds them, simply because human beings are made in the image of God and wholeness and wellness are conditions of the Kingdom of God (coming now in part, yet fully to come after the return of Christ).

But an evangelistic culture of service also recognizes that every human being's greatest need is the often unseen (or quieter) spiritual need for a Savior and a Friend (Jesus), and therefore views every service opportunity as also evangelistic.

Carefully, I do not say "a means of evangelism," for Christian service is not simply a means to another end. Service is itself an element of evangelism; at least, it *can* be and should be.

By connecting Christians with people outside the Church (whether needy or serving at our side), by making friends (in Jesus' name) and by starting conversations, which may (by God's grace and the activity of the Holy Spirit) lead to deeper matters, service and evangelism go hand-in-hand.

Living in the Kingdom

Living in the Kingdom of God is what makes preaching the Kingdom of God meaningful. Jesus demonstrated this. How many would have listened to His preaching if He had not ministered to them, fed the hungry, cast out demons, healed their sick, raised their dead?

Kingdom actions set the stage for Kingdom explanations: "*This is that*" (Acts 2:16).

Jesus understood this. He didn't serve people in order to "get a foot in the door" — service was not a bribe and evangelism was not an ulterior motive. Doing the Gospel and telling the Gospel are two parts of one whole. Doing the Gospel and telling the Gospel are what make us whole persons.

Jesus said, "*If you want to be great in God's Kingdom, learn to be the servant of all.*"

How will you respond? What will *you* do about this?

