

## *Kingdom Life Is Eternal life*

Isaiah 58: 1-10

Matthew 25: 31-40

Last week, I managed to pack four or five sermons into one, and still failed to address the title issue. Having dug a deep hole last week, I feel compelled to dig a little deeper, confident that I can complete a single thought and not simply dig the hole deeper. In any case, this will (thankfully) be my last Sunday to attempt this subject.

The presenting issue is what is meant when scripture refers to ‘eternal life.’ Commonly, Christians believe it is life-after-death in heaven, possibly even believing that this afterlife is some kind of Paradise of personal indulgences. Last week’s ‘Parade of Sermons’ in one sitting took us to several biblical realizations.

First, one needs to recall that, in the biblical scheme, death is introduced in the Garden of Eden story when the first couple disregards God’s instructions and gets tempted by the serpent’s indication that they will “become like God” if they eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. Death is one of several sanctions against the humans, and represents penalty for human sinfulness.

Second, one needs to know that the separation of the humans from God when the first couple gets cast out of Eden is the existential fault line about which the entirety of scripture ultimately revolves. The reconciliation of God and the human creation from this fault line of sin is what the entire scope of scripture is about. The salvation history for humanity works toward the re-uniting of heaven and earth. The relationship is broken early in the book of Genesis and it is restored in the final chapters of the book of Revelation when God and human see each other face-to-face once again.

Third, it is when this fault line of sinfulness is reconciled, and heaven and earth are reunited that eternal life begins. All talk of eternal life in scripture refers to that point at the end of all things when God’s will for reconciliation of heaven and earth is fulfilled. As Paul said last week in the reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4, even those who have died since Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection will be given their eternal life as much as those who are alive in the last days.

Fourth, all of the writers of the New Testament expected the end to come soon. Paul in particular, whose writings are the oldest in the New Testament, did not want people making long term commitments; he was that certain of Jesus’ imminent return to complete the work that he had begun.

Fifth, the reason that Paul expected Jesus’ imminent return was because of the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus presented the outstanding sign of the fast coming end of the age. The reason: Jesus’ resurrection signaled the end of death, the end of the sanction against humans since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Jesus, crucified and resurrected, showed that God’s plan was underway to end death, reunite heaven and earth, and bring the eternal age to fulfillment. It would happen soon.

Sixth, (still digging) the eternal life that is talked about should be a present reality. It is not something that happens after this life is over, and therefore we need not concern ourselves about it now. No, it happens in real time. Biblical presentations may talk of the future in visions, but they are talking about events expected to happen in real time. The rich young man who came to Jesus and wanted to inherit eternal life wanted it *now*, and Jesus offered it to him *now* if the man would sell his many possessions, give to the poor, and follow him. Eternal life begins now.

And for the last shovels in my digging enterprise, seventh, Kingdom life is eternal life now. That was Jesus' message. It is expected that the believer will become a new person, living the Kingdom life now *in participation with* the promise of eternal life. That is the question for today: what is the Kingdom life and how does one live it today?

The announcement of the final days begins with John the Baptist who urged people to repent and bear the fruits of righteousness. Jesus sees his ministry as the advancement of John's ministry from announcement of the Kingdom coming. Jesus own message and ministry as the Son of Man is that the Kingdom has arrived.

As Jesus teaches his disciples what the Kingdom is all about, he is introducing them to the Kingdom life, to what eternal life is all about. In his message and ministry, he draws on his Jewish tradition, the scriptures of the Torah-Law and the prophets.

Jesus knows about the writings of the prophet Isaiah, seeing himself in the earthly role as the Suffering Servant of God. In today's passage, we hear Isaiah talking about what religious practices were in his day, and how they seem indifferent to living the Kingdom life.

About two hundred years later, after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed and God's people had returned from the Babylonian exile and things had not progressed well at all. Third Isaiah – chapters 56-66 – turns to the worship and devotional life of God's people. The prophet gives God's word in a tone that has a mocking quality that echoes what God has heard from God's people: *Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?* God is showing utter contempt for the worship and devotional life of God's people.

Well, what *does* God want in worship? Third Isaiah spells it out for them:

*Is not this the kind of fast that I've chosen: to loose the chains of injustice, to undo the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and provide the homeless poor with shelter; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own brothers and sisters? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear....*

Third Isaiah has all this stuff about loosing the chains of injustice, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, and welcoming the outcast. What part of that sounds even remotely like worship?

These things aren't alien to us, of course. We recognize that stuff as mission stuff. I mean, we *like* mission stuff and all, but it surely isn't **worship**. This is confusing.

We need to answer this fundamental question about worship. This is at the heart of what we do in churches all across the world. We worship. We come to church on Sunday if nothing else. We measure ourselves on worship measures. How many butts are in the pews, and how much money did we collect? That's how we measure whether we're successful or not.

We set aside this space in all of our churches that is called a sanctuary where we worship. Chances are that nothing else much happens in that space all week long except during that hour or two on Sunday mornings. It's our sacred space. It's where God comes and meets us each week. We take great pride in our worship space and lovingly adorn it. It has made us a religion that is worship- or ritual-centered, and sanctuary-focused.

Yet we don't find his orientation endorsed, required, or valued in scripture. In fact, in many passages from the prophets, we find God's **hostility** to it.

God wants servants to advance the Kingdom among the people for whom God has the greatest care and concern; the weak, the poor, the vulnerable, the outcast. That's what the prophets are saying, and what Jesus is saying. It doesn't say to go to church on Sunday. That is not the kingdom life; that is not the present living of eternal life.

God and Jesus call us out there in the world, not in here to a sanctuary. Most of the people of God's primary concern aren't even in sanctuaries on the Sabbath. They're out there, struggling. The Kingdom life to which God has long been calling the faithful means: *to loose the chains of injustice, to undo the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to break every yoke ... to share your bread with the hungry, and provide the homeless poor with shelter; when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own brothers and sisters*. When you are doing those things, then you are living the Kingdom life, then you will experience eternal life.

Here near the end of Matthew, Jesus shares a vision of the Son of Man at the end of the age. The Son of Man has set the sheep on one side of his judgment throne and the goats on the other.

To the sheep on his right, he offers the fulfillment of the blessing of this Kingdom. He says, *For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me*.

The righteous ones have no recollection of ministering to Jesus in this way. *We never did that for you*, they say. Jesus replies, *Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me*.

The righteous did not understand that Jesus was present in that person to whom they gave food, gave drink, offered compassion, friendship, justice, and mercy.

And surely if those condemned had only *known* Jesus was there, they would have acted differently. But wasn't that the point? The spirit of those who were truly faithful did not measure their actions by how appropriate it would be, how sensible it was, how practical it may seem, or if other people would do such a thing. They did not consider judging as their entitled prerogative, or blaming as the first response, or looking the other way in avoidance, or calculating whether a gesture was deserved. By their faithful Kingdom spirit, they simply knew what to do and were faithful in doing it. They were living the Kingdom life now; they were living eternal life now.

Those making great professions of faith, who went to church every Sunday, who read their Bibles until they were worn out, who prayed incessantly, who could quote scripture, and who read their devotionals every day were clearly more religious than the rest. Surely these giants of spiritual practices would be among the favored. Yet we see that the Kingdom life doesn't consist of these devotional practices. In fact, these religious heroes may be the first to judge another, to blame the victim, to despise the poor and outcast, to cherish harshness and strictness in order to feel superior and in control, and a host of other unpleasant, un-Kingdom-like attributes.

*To live the Kingdom life is to manifest the spirit of the Kingdom in one's life, for that is what eternal life is – the full manifestation of God's Kingdom.* Let me say that again because all of my digging may have found something worthwhile: *To live the Kingdom life is to manifest the spirit of the Kingdom in one's life, for that is what eternal life is – the full manifestation of God's Kingdom.*

God's Kingdom is the place where God is sovereign, where the Powers of the world no longer command and control human existence. God's Kingdom is defined not by profit and wealth, but by compassion and sharing. God's Kingdom is defined not by in-people and out-people, but by radical mutuality, equality, and respect. God's Kingdom is defined not by rich and poor, but by the end of such terms as abundance is enjoyed by all equitably as God has always intended. God's Kingdom is defined not by winners and losers, or by domination and control, but by shared blessings that bring peace, reconciliation, and the promise of new life for all.

Living the Kingdom life *now*, we come to understand, practice, and live the eternal life *now* that gets made complete by Jesus at the end of the age. I don't know how many really want *that* kind of eternal life. I doubt many people are so interested that they would change their present life to grow into truly living the Kingdom life. Then again, I don't think Jesus' true message is really so "popular" after all. I think people make it into what they want which is always ends up a mess, where people seek to 'become like God' all over again.

May you embrace the gospel of new life that Jesus calls us to make our own, now.