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*This way forward*

## STEWARDSHIP THROUGH THE LORD'S PRAYER: GOD'S KINGDOM IS WITHIN YOU

Luke 17:20-21

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The history of the world is largely a history of kings exerting oppressive rule over their subjects. In other words, it follows the golden rule...whoever has the gold, makes the rules. As a country, we are very anxious about our next ruler. There is a strong feeling that whoever it is, things will be worse. But a little context for us might relive our worries ...maybe.

Remember the history of the kings of ancient cultures. The king believed the subjects were given to him by God for his own benefit and the glory of the land. Thus, the king had an absolute right to create laws and execute justice. Not justice for the people, but justice for his own rule. In our system we have an (almost) unique situation in all the history of the world – power to the people – the power to select and to replace our leader should they not serve the will of the people.

When Israel emerged as a kingdom, at first God refused to give them a king. God warned them a king would take their daughters for wives, their sons for soldiers, and their goods for taxes. God would be their king. But the people were afraid of their enemies and begged for an earthly king. Unfortunately, the history of Israel's kings is about the same as any other nation: a few good ones and slew of greedy, misguided, and outright evil ones.

Israel found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Their enemies surrounding them on all sides, while their own kings weakened, or even destroyed them, from within.

Thus, when Jesus prayed "Thy Kingdom come," he was tapping into a deep yearning of the human soul across culture and time. We have a similar feeling in our land today. As a country, we seem trapped on a course of fear and injustice. The shootings we see across the news on an almost daily basis let us know that something is not right

but, as a country, we cannot agree on the precise nature of the problem or a method to solve it.

Though this fear and injustice is the most visible, there are a slew of other issues. The fact that a person can work two jobs and still not afford housing, food, and medicine is wrong. We need energy to run the country but we must protect the environment as well. How do we balance that? Every child deserves an excellent education, but millions receive no education at all. Women should get the same pay for the same work. Sadly, I could go on perhaps for hours.

As humans we have built in limitations. We are limited by our intelligence that cannot design perfect systems or perfect laws. Every system or law will have unintended consequences or omissions. And we are limited by our nature. You know the saying... Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The good news that Jesus taught his followers is that God's kingdom is coming. By inviting us to pray for it, Jesus is giving us hope that the one who can construct perfect laws and execute perfect justice ... is coming.

This means that as his disciples, Christ has given you power.

The power to pray, "Thy Kingdom Come!" with boldness, with courage, with conviction, and with hope. Praying to call upon the Lord to "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream!"

Stewardship season is prayer season. Pray that God will break people's hearts with compassion and justice for the downtrodden, so they will act for God. Pray as a country we will have the courage to invest in God's kingdom of love and hope for all people. Pray that people will see Jesus on the street corner, in the prisons, in the workplace, and in their

homes. Pray for the police to have Godlike power to discern. It must be so terribly hard.

Pray for us all that we would not fear one another but trust and respect each other. That we would see God in each other's faces. Pray that all of us would listen, truly listen, from the deepest place of our hearts.

To pray for this kingdom is to pray for your own spirit. To pray that it no longer be numbed by the sheer avalanche of misery and pain. Pray God will grant you a generous spirit to help this kingdom work to grow. Pray that you can, once again, be torn into pieces over one life tragically lost; pray for anger at injustice born of hate, inequality, or sheer bureaucratic inertia. Pray that God wakes you up.

This is a fearsome prayer – to pray for God's kingdom. For wherever the kingdom comes, it turns the world upside-down.

But this kingdom is not only something we wait for. There are two biblical aspects of the kingdom "the already" and the "not yet". The perfect divine rule has not yet come but the presence of the king is already here.

Wherever Christ is king, the Kingdom is here by definition. Yet, he was a different kind of king. Jesus' incarnational identity was that of the suffering servant. The one who gives his life through suffering to bring about God's rule. He did not come as a politically-conquering king so his is not a political kingdom but a communal kingdom based on reciprocity, generosity, and sharing. In Jesus' life, the kingdom of God was an overlay in the midst of Roman rule. So when Jesus healed the sick and fed the hungry we see a moment in which God's kingdom was realized.

We who are here this morning have been so tremendously blessed by God. I cannot fathom why God has given me so much. A loving wife, wonderful children, my health, a sound mind, a marvelous town, a good education for my children, easy access to drinking water, plenty of food, and good people to enjoy it with. I have more than I could possibly deserve. More than perhaps 99% of

the people on this planet. Perhaps you have been similarly blessed by God.

God told Abraham, "I will bless you so that you may be a blessing." Everything that God gives you serves two purposes. One, so that you will know that the Lord is God and that His steadfast love endures forever. Two, so that you will share it with others, that they too may know that the Lord is God. Blessed to be a blessing.

In this stewardship season, we must remember that the power God gives is not only for prayer but also for action.

We pray "thy kingdom come" every week; but it is not a "sit on your hands" prayer; it is a "make it happen" prayer; a prayer for God to use us to bring that kingdom. Unlike football, kingdom work is not a spectator sport and we (the church, Spartanburg, Haiti, children) desperately need you in the game to pledge your support and to take action.

Don't pray the prayer if you are not willing to get in the game to make that kingdom happen. Let's get our hands dirty and do something!!! Let's be "James Christians"; Not just hearers or prayers of the law but doers.

As stewards, we are to invest in the kingdom. Even though your money will not create a paradise for all people, it will feed hungry children. It will educate them. It will promote racial reconciliation. It will help us put roofs over people's heads in Spartanburg and Haiti. It will give forgotten people meaning and lost people hope. Your money can make the kingdom break into people's lives. God's kingdom is here! It is wherever God's will is being done "on earth as it is in heaven".

When people asked Jesus where the kingdom of God was, he said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." Some translations even say, "The kingdom of God is *within* you!"

A few months ago, William Brown shared his story at Rotary. He had been blessed by God through success in the business world. He wanted to give something back so he started to coach basketball. He remembered one young man who had a hopeful future through attending college. But he quit the team. He quit school. His parents said he needed to work to help the family make ends meet.

This man was visibly shaken by that one child. And so he started Legacy Charter school in Greenville. He used his own funds to help it be successful. Its vision is simple – every child graduates from *college*. Not just graduates from high school. Not just attends college. But every child graduates from college.

You have God's kingdom inside of you because the love of God is there. "Blessed to be a blessing...God's kingdom *is* among us! Because God's kingdom is in you!