

STAND STRONG

Living Faithfully in a Dark World

July 8-14, 2019

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"He said, "Do not fear,
greatly beloved, you are safe.
Be strong and courageous!"
When he spoke to me,
I was strengthened and said,
"Let my lord speak,
for you have strengthened me."

Daniel 10:19

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This outline is a guideline for possible topics to be discussed. Individual teachers may choose to focus on some topics at the exclusion of others.

Introduction

“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’” Mark 1:14-15

Entering into God’s kingdom requires a radical reorientation. The direction we are taking our lives – and the perspective by which we view the world – are horribly askew, and until they are flipped around, everything that God has to offer through Jesus Christ will seem upside down and nonsensical. Join us in exploring the beautiful paradoxes of Christ’s kingdom, where down is up, weakness is strength, servitude is freedom, death is life, smallness is greatness, foolishness is wisdom, and defeat is victory.

Tuesday The Kingdom Encrypted | Mark 4:1-20**The Key Parable of the Soils & the Puzzling Purpose of Parables***Mark 4:1-20**Matthew 13:1-23**Luke 8:4-15**Isaiah 6:8-10*

1. People often assume that Jesus spoke in parables to make his message more relatable and accessible. What reasoning does Jesus give for his use of parables?
2. How did Jesus' parables give his disciples and "those who were around him" more understanding without giving any benefit to "those outside" (i.e., the casual or cynical observer)?
3. Was it unfair of Jesus to obscure his teaching from "those outside" by using parables? Did Jesus want people to understand, or not? Based on the whole text, whose fault was it that certain people did not understand?
4. What should we do if we have a hard time understanding the parables of Jesus? How can we guard against self-styled interpretations of these encrypted messages?
5. How is this parable foundational to understanding Jesus' other parables?
6. To what extent can we contribute to the "goodness" of our own soil? To what extent must we rely on outside help? How can the soil of our hearts become loosened, cleared, and weeded?
7. Is one kind of soil more prevalent in our broader culture? Within your local community? Is there a certain way we should present the message of God's kingdom that might make people more open to it? To what extent can we change the presentation without changing the message?

8. To what extent is the good news of God's kingdom inherently hidden, and how should this affect the way that we proclaim it?

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Wednesday The Kingdom Encoded | Matthew 13:24-43**Kingdom Parables: Messy Times, Small Beginnings***Mathew 13:24-43**Mark 4:30-34**Luke 13:18-21**Ezekiel 17:22-24**Daniel 4:10-14**Psalms 78:2*

1. In the parable of the wheat and tares, how do the slaves first respond to the dilemma of the tares (v. 27)? In what ways are we sometimes surprised by evil in a world we expect to be good? How do we share the impulse to question God or propose quick solutions?
2. Have you ever wanted to completely root out all the evil from this world? Share what happened when you or someone you know tried to do this.
3. For those who yearn for God's righteous kingdom, what response does this parable invite?
4. What does this mixed crop imagery – and the master's long-term strategy – communicate about God's kingdom as it manifests itself on this earth?
5. To what extent can we know whether someone is a "wheat" or a "tare"?
6. Seeing that they are sandwiched in between, what might the parables of the mustard seed (vv. 31-32) and the yeast (v. 33) have to do with the parable of the mixed crop?
7. The mustard plant is an invasive species that can quickly spread and overwhelm other nearby plants. To the gardener, birds are often seen as a nuisance and a pest (but see, Ezekiel 17:22-24; Daniel 4:10-14). In the parable of the leaven (v. 33), "three measures" is roughly equivalent to 50-60 pounds of flour! Are these specific features intended to communicate something about God's kingdom?

8. How have you seen the Kingdom of God, though seemingly small in comparison (like leaven), significantly change the surrounding world?

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Thursday The Kingdom Assigned | Matthew 5:1-12**The “Upside-Down” Beatitudes***Matthew 5:1-12**Luke 6:20-26*

1. Reflect on vv. 1-2. To what extent are you a persistent follower of Christ who breaks from the crowd and follows Jesus up the mountain? How can you tell whether someone is one or the other, and what difference does it make?
2. Consider the kinds of people depicted in each beatitude (e.g., the poor in spirit, the mourners, etc.) and write down what you think the world would have to say about each one. What kind of description/destiny/inheritance would the world assign for each of the eight groups of people, and how does Jesus’ angle run counter to it?
3. To what extent are the beatitudes a summons to live an “upside-down” life? To what extent are they a depiction of God’s “upside-down” grace and mercy?
4. By v. 10, Jesus switches from talking about people (in the 3rd person) to talking to the disciples directly (in the 2nd person). What is the importance of seeing Jesus’ teaching as personal instruction for us versus general maxims about the world?
5. Six of the beatitudes talk about future destinies (vv. 4-9) and two mention a present inheritance (vv. 3, 10). Yet, all eight talk about present blessing. Why is this, and what can we learn about God’s kingdom through this?
6. What are some practical ways in which people today can live out each of these eight radical dispositions?
7. Which of these eight kingdom dispositions do you relate to the most? Which is the hardest for you to embody? How do we become sanctified into the kind of people for whom these “upside-down” dispositions come naturally?

8. Who around you embody these eight dispositions? How have you seen God respond to their situations? How can you, like Jesus, affirm these people on a daily basis?

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Friday**The Kingdom Accentuated | Matthew 5:17-30****The Law & Prophets Fulfilled***Matthew 5:17-20**Luke 16:17*

1. Why does Jesus need to emphasize that he is not abolishing the law or the prophets? What do the ancient commandments have to do with the newly inaugurated Kingdom of Heaven?
2. Look at vv. 21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-35, 38-39, 43-44. Do Jesus' new teachings seem harder or easier than the old commands? How does Jesus bring the ancient, irrevocable scriptures to fulfillment and completion?
3. In what way does God expect his kingdom-citizens to obey every stroke and letter of the law (v. 19)? To what extent does God's grace excuse us from His high kingdom-standards? To what extent does God's grace empower us to live up to them?
4. How is it possible for people (like the scribes and Pharisees in v. 20) to have such biblical familiarity, rigor, and/or enthusiasm and still miss the mark? Have you ever fallen into such a pitfall?

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Friday**The Kingdom Accentuated | Matthew 5:17-30****Concerning Anger***Matthew 5:21-26**Luke 12:57-59**Exodus 20:13; 21:12**Deuteronomy 5:17**Deuteronomy 17:8-13*

5. Jesus builds upon and intensifies the original Law by putting anger and every-day insults on a similar (and even more serious) level as murder. Is he exaggerating here? What is the radical standard of righteousness that Jesus is calling us to, and what are the ways that we often try to excuse ourselves from it?
6. Within the past week, how have your emotions and words towards others compared to Jesus' high kingdom-standards? What anger, insults, and verbal abuse do you need to repent of?
7. How does Jesus relate and prioritize human reconciliation with divine worship (vv. 23-24)? How does this reflect the realities and priorities of God's kingdom?
8. Within an angry and verbally explosive world, how does putting away anger (see also, Ephesians 4:36, 31), refraining from insults and verbal abuse, and quickly reconciling help us to embody the beatitudes (vv. 3-12) and live salty/bright lives (vv. 13-14)? How does doing these things help fulfill the intent behind God's original command against murder?

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Friday The Kingdom Accentuated | Matthew 5:17-30**Concerning Lust***Matthew 5:27-30**Mark 9:34-37**Exodus 20:14**Deuteronomy 5:18*

9. How can we not only guard against the tainting and violating of our bodies, but also of our relationships and our hearts? How do our desires shape who we are? How do they define our relationships?
10. What is needed in order to obey Christ's radical sexual ethic in a world that has mastered the manipulation and inflammation of desire (through marketing) and has become completely open and casual towards all sorts of non-marital sexual relationships?
11. Are there things in your life that "cause you to stumble" – things that might be good and useful in themselves, but are triggers which take you down a dark path of unholy desire? Which of those things feel like they are very much a part of who you are? How might God be telling you to cut off those paths of sin by staying far away from them?
12. What would it look like if we took unbridled sexual desire towards a non-spouse as seriously as we take the act of adultery? What would confession, discipline, repentance, and restoration look like? How can the careful reordering and redirecting of our desires bring us – and the world around us – closer to God's kingdom?

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Saturday The Kingdom Amplified | Matthew 5:33-42**Concerning Oaths***Matthew 5:33-37**Matthew 23:16-22**Exodus 20:7**Leviticus 19:12**Numbers 30:2**Deuteronomy 23:21**James 5:12*

1. The old covenant did not allow God's people to go back on their verbal pledges, especially when they were directed towards God or when they invoked God's holiness as verification. How does Jesus' teaching show that incompleteness of the original commandment, and how does Jesus bring it to the fullness that God intended (v. 17)?
2. What kinds of things have you said with too much certainty and confidence? In what ways have you created a two-tier system of "truth", where your word cannot be trusted unless you emphatically pledge that it is true?
3. We know that Jesus avoided and redirected certain questions, but that is because they had faulty premises or devious motives. He also hid his identity as the Messiah from most people for most of his ministry, but this was to avoid reinforcing common misunderstandings of what the messianic king was supposed to be. Is there anything in Christ's teachings or example that allow kingdom-citizens to willfully deceive? What are the kingdom principles that should guide us?
4. What are the costs and benefits of conforming to Jesus' radical standard of non-pretentious speech and simple truth-telling? How is this kind of lifestyle "upside-down" in the eyes of the world, and how will it be "salt and light" to the world?

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Saturday The Kingdom Amplified | Matthew 5:33-42**Concerning Retaliation***Matthew 5:38-42**Luke 6:29-30**Exodus 21:24**Leviticus 24:19-20**Deuteronomy 19:21**1 Peter 3:9*

5. To what extent is God's command of "an eye for an eye" to be seen as a strictly enforced punishment, and to what extent is this command a merciful limit to retaliatory efforts? How does Jesus' command to "not resist the evildoer" (v. 39) follow along the same trajectory as "an eye for an eye", and how does it bring the old command to its intended destination (v. 17)?
6. When Jesus tells his disciples to "turn the other cheek", is he teaching them to welcome or encourage repeated abuse? What is the internal disposition that Jesus is encouraging through this teaching? When Jesus says to give to "everyone who begs", does he literally mean everyone? How do we accurately understand what Jesus is teaching here without emptying it of its radical, upside-down nature?
7. Some have noted that most people were right-handed in Jesus' day and culture, so the initial strike on the right cheek implies a backhanded slap; this would have been hugely disrespectful, especially within the honor/shame culture of Jesus' day. Also, the outer garment/coat/cloak (the one willingly given) was the more expensive garment and for the vast majority of people was essential to keep oneself warm at night; without the inner or outer garments, the average person could have been wearing literally nothing. Finally, by Roman law, a soldier could compel a Jew to drop whatever they are doing and carry their gear from one milepost to the next one. What bearing might this cultural-historical information have on the intended meaning of Jesus' teachings?

8. Jesus demands a very active reply towards the one who does evil against us. What are ways that we can lovingly “dramatize” and draw attention to the evil that is being done to us, while at the same time welcoming the evildoer to face us and see us as fellow human beings and image-bearers? What are ways that we can respond to greed and unfairness with shocking generosity? What are ways that we can respond to forcefulness with unexpected willingness? How do these responses lead to a “blessed” life, one that shines light into a dark world and fulfills God’s deepest intentions?

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Additional Questions for Reflection | Tuesday

The Benefits of Receptivity: Full Disclosure, Overflowing Measure

Mark 4:21-25

Matthew 5:15; 7:2

Matthew 10:26; 13:12

Matthew 25:29

Luke 6:38; 8:16-18

Luke 11:33; 12:2; 19:26

- What is the main point behind Jesus' light analogy in vv. 21-22? What does it have to do with the following exhortation to listen and pay attention (vv. 23-24), and how does it tie into Jesus' teachings about the secrecy and hiddenness of God's kingdom in vv. 11-12?
- How can v. 22 encourage us when we run into a mystery about God and His kingdom that does not seem to make sense?
- When Jesus mentions "the measure you give" in v. 24, he is likely referencing something other than almsgiving and financial generosity. Given the context, what do you suppose Jesus is talking about here?
- In v. 25, how might the concept of something being "taken away" tie into the seed that is taken away in v. 15, or to the parable/secret that is listened to but not understood in v. 12?

The Unexplainable & Unmanaged Growth of God's Kingdom

Mark 4:26-29

- Between the initial scattering (v. 26) and the final harvesting (v. 29), what words are used to describe the farmer's actions towards his crop? What words describe his thoughts?
- Regardless of understanding how a seed grows, to what extent is the growth observable and its process describable (v. 28)?

- In what ways have you seen the Kingdom of God grow independently, or bear fruit in ways that have been hard to understand?
- Why is it helpful for us to know that God's kingdom mysteriously "produces of itself" and involves a long-term growth process that we are not in charge of?

Additional Questions for Reflection | Wednesday

Twin Kingdom Parables: Cost and Value

Matthew 13:44-46

- What are the commonalities and differences between these two parables? In each of these parables, is the prized item in need of being found? What is sold to obtain the prized item? Is that which is purchased the prized item itself? Is the price paid equivalent to the value of the prized item? Was the purchaser actively in pursuit of the prized item before they found it? Is the transaction transparent or sneaky? Is the exchange done grudgingly, or with joy? Is the prized item of practical or aesthetic value? Is the prize a means to an end, or an end in itself?
- How does the Kingdom of God challenge or reorder your priorities?
- In what ways have you found costly renunciation as a part of your wholehearted and enthusiastic commitment to God's kingdom? What lesser goods have you traded in for the one greatest Good? Has it been a good trade? How would you explain this trade to the curious onlooker?

Look What the Kingdom Dragged In

Matthew 13:47-50

- Why do you suppose the inspired author included two parables that seem very similar to each other in meaning (compare vv. 47-50 with vv. 24-30)? What is the value of this second one?
- How might this concept of a mixed catch have challenged first-century Jews who were yearning for the righteous kingdom of David to be restored?

- Like the net, how is God's kingdom indiscriminate of whom it catches?
- How is this parable both a word of comfort and a word of warning?
- Have you ever known someone who wanted to completely separate themselves from the "badness" of the world around them? If so, what happened?
- In a parable where "the angels" do all the sorting in the end, what is the practical application for us?

Additional Questions for Reflection | Thursday

High-Contrast Lives in an Upside-Down World

Matthew 5:13-16

Mark 9:50; 4:21

Luke 14:34-35; 8:16

Luke 11:33

- Who is the “you” in vv. 13-14? The disciples? Israel? God’s people in general?
- Within its immediate context, how is this salt and light imagery connected with the previous beatitudes and/or the “antitheses” that follow (vv. 17-48)?
- Salt preserves, enhances flavor, and in the ancient world was seen as one of the essentials for human life. It was also used within Old Testament covenant ceremonies (Exodus 30:35; Leviticus 2:13; Ezekiel 43:24). How does embodying Jesus’ counterintuitive beatitudes beneficially influence the world around us? How might living a radically different kingdom-life help prevent corruption or blandness within human society? What will it require for us to take our covenant witness seriously and work towards consecrating the world to the Lord?
- What is your current sphere of influence? What kind of effect have you had on that sphere?
- What would be the benefit of adding salt to flavorless salt?
- “Unsalty salt” is like “unwet water”: it is a contradiction of terms. If something loses its essential quality, it ceases to exist as itself and becomes something else. What is the intended warning or emphasis with this?
- Jesus’ use of bushel/lampstand imagery here (vv. 14-16) seems to have a somewhat different purpose than the time he used it in Mark 4:21-23. Given the context, what is the intended meaning of this imagery here?

- What does the irrevocable visibility of a “city on a hill” (v. 14) teach us about kingdom living?
- Contrast what Jesus says about living visible lives here to what he says in 6:1, 5, 16. What is the tension between these two teachings, and what’s the danger of trying to live visibly good lives?

Additional Questions for Reflection | Friday**Concerning Divorce***Matthew 5:31-32**Matthew 19:1-12**Mark 10:1-12**Luke 16:18**Deuteronomy 24:1-4*

- Jesus continues to expand God's radical sexual ethic by challenging people's "biblically based" allowances of divorce and broadening the definition of adultery. Did God actually allow divorce under the old covenant (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), and if so, why would God allow divorce if he ultimately sees most divorce-and-remarriages as adultery?
- How is adultery inherently wrong? How is adultery wrong because of its effects?
- Why does Jesus give the exception clause in v. 32 (see also, Matthew 19:9), and why do you suppose this clause is excluded from Mark 10:11-12?
- How does obeying Jesus' countercultural restriction against divorce lead to a "blessed" life (vv. 3-12)? How is this kind of lifestyle "salt and light" to the world (vv. 13-16)? How does this teaching take the original commandment and bring it to the ultimate conclusion that God intended (v. 17)?

Additional Questions for Reflection | Saturday

Concerning Enemies

Matthew 5:43-48

Luke 6:27-28; 32-33

Luke 6:36

Leviticus 19:18

Psalms 139:19-22

Deuteronomy 7:1-2

- There is no Old Testament text where God directly commands His people to hate their enemies, although Jesus could have been referencing first-century conventional wisdom or could have been challenging the interpretations of such passages as Psalm 139:19-22, or Deuteronomy 7:1-2. In what ways do the societal and cultural forces around us push and condition us to hate our enemies? What do we need to do to someone in our heart and mind before we can start hating them?
- To what extent are disciples and imitators of Jesus supposed to have enemies?
- “Love” is a widely used and very ambiguous word these days, as it is defined in many different ways by many different people. What kind of love is Jesus talking about here?
- What are all the things that you cannot do to someone while loving them (with Christ-like agape-love) at the same time? What are actions you do towards someone while agape-loving them?
- When is the last time you offered a genuine gesture of love to an enemy? What happened?
- When is the last time you lovingly pleaded before the Lord for the wellbeing of the person who is “out to get you”? How did God respond?
- In vv. 45-48, what attribute(s) of God is Jesus drawing out for us to imitate? Why is imitating God so important for us being

His children, especially when Jesus seems to imply that He already is our “Heavenly Father”? Where else in the sermon does Jesus refer to being children of God, and what might that have to do with loving our enemies indiscriminately?

- To what extent can we stir up within ourselves such radical enemy-love? To what extent do we need God to supernaturally nurture it within us, and how do we get to that point?
- Some may think that loving one’s enemies is reserved for an extreme, life-threatening situation that may never happen. Whereas we may be called to love in such an unlikely scenario, how can loving our ordinary enemies within our day-to-day lives help shape us into people whom Jesus can call “blessed” (vv. 3-11) and who can salt and brighten the world?



See You Next Year!