



Where the Kingdom Draws Near

Exodus 19:3-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8; Romans 5:1-8

What do we do with those things we hold most precious? Do we flaunt them before the world to be sure everyone knows what we possess, perhaps hoping to inspire jealousy? Do we hide them away from view to keep them safe? Do we share them with the world, neither hoarding nor worrying over questions of ownership, status, or protection? The gospel of the kingdom of Jesus Christ is a message we zealously guard as precious. At times, perhaps we guard it only too well. As long as we protect it, we may distort it from its intended purposes. It is, after all, not to be guarded as we might our earthly treasures. It is not to be flaunted as some sort of status symbol, either. It is to be cherished and taken where the kingdom of Christ Jesus draws near.

When the Hebrews gathered at the mountain after being rescued from Egypt, they were all too quick to accept any and all conditions to be *Yahweh's* people. God had redeemed them from slavery. They had seen great victory over the Egyptians. *Yahweh* had proven supremacy over the gods of Egypt, given them safety in the wilderness, and ushered them into a new life. If they heard God's words through Moses, they did not register them much beyond a very general sense that they were to serve *Yahweh*. They were concerned with enjoying the blessings of being *Yahweh's* special people. They were not thinking about the responsibilities such a standing entailed.

God spoke through Moses to say, "You shall be my people, but there is a purpose to it. There is a task at hand. I have cared for you, lifting you up as though on eagles' wings. Now you will be a kingdom of priests for me. You will serve as instruments of my presence among the nations. You were not rescued to be a nation unto yourselves. You are my emissaries before the world."

That is what God said, but that is not what they heard. They heard what they wanted to hear: "We are now *Yahweh's* special people. We can sit back and trust God to take care of us like spoiled children with no responsibilities." At least, that is what their actions proclaimed. That is the way they began life as the chosen people of *Yahweh*. Being priests to the whole world seemed too far-fetched an idea to impact daily living. They could just skip over that part. Someone else could worry about that. Let Moses handle it. After all, it seemed too grand a task for the rank and file.

In the New Testament, Paul had no such delusions about his own responsibilities. He knew that God's commission through Moses applied to those who claim the benefits of the gospel. If the Exodus from Egypt was a central focus of God's revelation in the Old Testament, it was symbolic for Paul of what Christ Jesus had done for believers. As for the Hebrews of old, God in Christ Jesus came to our aid. God offered redemption along with a greater purpose for our lives—the same purpose for which Jesus lived and died. For Paul, the gospel was never simply about his own redemption. It was about the redemption of the entire world. His own redemption was simply a part of that greater task.

Paul wrote the Roman believers that Christ died for us in our sinful weakness. Christ died for us, fully aware that we were far from being what God desires us to become. Even so, God's love covered us. It was *because* of our separation from God that we were redeemed by the blood of Christ Jesus. It is precisely for those who live separated from God that we are now to live and work to redeem. Where is the gospel to be heard, lived, and find its heart, soul, and flesh? It is not within the walls of our sanctuaries. Rather, it is in the byways, alleys, clubs, and those parts of town we purposefully avoid. This is where Jesus took the good news in his day—to those considered riffraff by the religious folk. It is where we are called to carry it now. It is to those on the outside to whom Jesus would have the kingdom draw near.

This does not happen by sitting in our pews. This does not happen by getting dressed up for church on Sunday morning. This does not happen by reading our copies of God's inspired word, studying our Sunday school lessons, and participating in committee meetings. It is more than these good things of our life in Christ. It happens in what we do outside these walls. That is where the Kingdom of God draws near to those for whom Christ died and commissioned us to live.

To heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out demons, we have to get messy. The gospel is not quite like the sterile atmosphere of an ideal hospital environment. We are granted no mission of latex-free gloves, surgical masks, and disinfected surfaces. Rather, we are given the charge of stepping beyond our sterile, comfortable, surroundings to join Jesus in fulfilling God's mission in the messy reality of the real world around us.

Those outside the security of our sanctuary walls are the ones we are called to love. Those are the ones for whom we are called to give our very lives. Christ Jesus suffered and died to redeem us, but such a redemption was not for us alone. It should find itself extended through our lives into the neediest, most unregenerate places of our community, nation, and world.

Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine healing the sick. Jesus sweated under the hot sun to display God's compassion for crowds in need. He did not sit in the comfort of urban society with all its niceties. Rather, he went where people were in need, ministering to their desperation in love, grace, and redemption. He called a tax collector to his side—a man unworthy from our standards. He called unschooled fishermen to share his message with others in need of God's healing touch. He even called one who would betray him.

He sent them out on a mission. "Go to the lost sheep of Israel. Go to the ones who are in desperate need of God's message of grace, redemption, love, and forgiveness. Go to those society would cast on its dung heap, and preach the love of God."

Last week, Jimmy Draper, former head of Lifeway, told Southern Baptists, "We conservatives claim to have the truth and we think we are rich in spiritual position and power, but yet we are cold, complacent, impotent, unattractive, and irrelevant to the world. I hate to say it, but we are not plateaued. We're not even just declining. We're in a free fall.... You know why we don't win the lost? Because we don't like them. They are different from us. We don't care for them. We have no real love for them."¹

The gospel must change the focus of our lives. We must accept its responsibility toward others. We must see the gospel as more than the full funding of a heavenly retirement account. To fulfill the gospel, we must seek the direction of Christ and those to whom His kingdom would draw near.

As God spoke through Moses in Exodus, we are called to a purpose greater than our own benefit. We are commissioned to be God's people on a mission beyond ourselves. For as Christ Jesus died for the ungodly, fully aware of our faults, he likewise commissioned us to extend the grace of the gospel to the lost sheep we more naturally neglect.

How will we respond to the real message of Christ? The gospel is far more than blessing for those inside God's grace. The kingdom of Christ is more than safety, security, and comfort. It is a challenge to live beyond the safety of our sanctuary walls. More than taking us to heaven, the gospel is about taking heaven into the unsafe regions of our world. Where will the kingdom draw near on our watch?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

¹ Jimmy Draper, quoted in Allen, Bob, "Former SBC Leader Declares Denomination in 'Free Fall'." June 10, 2008, Baptist Center for Ethics: http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=10593.