

## **Series Gospel of Luke**

### **This Message #27 The Kingdom of God — Who's In, Who's Not**

#### **Scripture Luke 17:20-36**

The final days of Jesus' life on earth were very people intensive, even more so than usual. The Pharisees constantly bombarded Him with questions in their efforts to find some issue by which to condemn Him and remove Him from His influence among the people. Large crowds of people surrounded Jesus wherever He went. The expectations of these people were running high. Many were hoping for the imminent enthronement of the Messiah. Everyone realized that circumstances were building to a climax. Jesus Himself sought quality time, first to be with His disciples because they had much to learn, and He also wanted to spend more quiet time alone with the Father because He understood the pressures He would face leading up to the crucifixion.

In the midst of all these challenges to His time and energy, Jesus managed to have an extended conversation with His disciples about the signs which would be associated with the end of the age. That conversation is recorded in Matthew chapter 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, and in Luke 17, the passage we will think about today.

I have two main objectives in studying this passage. First, I want to communicate information about the kingdom of God. Jesus talked about this subject on previous occasions, and we will be reviewing some of this information He taught. Second, I want to highlight the differences in the understanding of the kingdom between the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees regarded Jesus and His role in the kingdom of God in much the same way as many people today, and I want us to avoid their mistakes. We must be like the disciples.

#### **Read Luke 17:20-36**

Notice that Jesus' first statement was in response to a question asked by the Pharisees. There was lots of speculation about the kingdom of God among the Jews. Jesus, in His teaching ministry, had raised the interest level about this topic among the religious leaders because He had publically stated that His goal was to "preach the good news about the kingdom of God" in all the cities and towns of Israel. Everywhere He went He demonstrated the powers of the kingdom (*Luke 4:43*).

It was appalling and inexcusable that the Pharisees, after observing Jesus' ministry for three years, were still asking "when the kingdom of God would come." Their question was an indication of their blindness and obstinacy. They had not accepted the healing of diseases, the restoring of life to the dead, the calming of raging storms, and the casting out of demons as evidence that the kingdom of God had come. The Pharisees refused to acknowledge that the actions of Jesus were the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

According to Jewish teaching, the arrival of Messiah would be clear and obvious to all. However, the signs of Jesus' ministry, although spectacular and impressive, did not meet the criteria of the Pharisees. Neither did the background of Jesus' birth and His humble upbringing fit their criteria; nor did His teachings, nor His unwillingness to become involved in political activities. Because the conditions of Jesus' life did not fit their preconceived ideas about the promised Messiah, His ministry, in their opinion, did not reflect the kingdom's presence.

The attitudes of the Pharisees were very inconsistent. On the one hand they expected the kingdom of God to come with "signs and wonders," and, on occasion, they challenged Jesus to prove Himself by performing signs (*Matthew 12:38; 16:1; Mark 8:11*), yet, when they witnessed the miracles of Jesus, they refused to accept the fact that He was the Messiah.

And so we have the situation in which the Pharisees had no confidence that Jesus was the Messiah, but this did not prevent them from asking His opinion about the kingdom. They wanted to know "when" the kingdom would come. In His response to them, Jesus did not focus on "when." Instead, He described the nature of the kingdom. He said that the kingdom was not visible, and that people would not be able to pin down its location because the main characteristic of the kingdom was not its physical aspect.

The term that is translated “careful observation” described what a doctor would do in examining a patient in order to diagnose an illness, or what an astronomer would do in studying the stars in order to determine the trajectory of a comet or planet. Like doctors and astronomers, the Pharisees were looking for certain physical phenomena that would help them recognize the arrival of the kingdom of God.

Instead of the question about “when,” their question should have been “what” — as in “What is the nature of the kingdom?” The Pharisees, like too many people today, did not have an adequate understanding of the true nature of the kingdom. On a previous occasion, Jesus alluded to this deficiency in their understanding. In Luke 12:54-56 He said, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; how is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?” That’s a good question that still applies to people today.

Only a few of the religious leaders recognized the uniqueness of Jesus and sought to reconcile the activities of Jesus with their understanding of the Scriptures. Nicodemus was one of those few individuals. In the gospel of John, we read that “he came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him’” (*John 3:2*). Nicodemus acknowledged that Jesus was doing the supernatural work of the kingdom. He was one of those who was correctly “interpreting the present time.”

If the Pharisees had listened to Jesus carefully, they would not have needed to ask their question. On previous occasions, by means of parables, Jesus had described the nature of the kingdom. Jesus had compared the kingdom of God to a mustard seed. The seed had a small beginning, but it grew and became a large plant (*Luke 13:18-19*). Jesus also said the kingdom was like the small clump of yeast which was mixed into a large amount of dough. The yeast eventually worked throughout the dough (*Luke 13:20-21*).

Jesus informed His listeners that “the kingdom of God was among them” — “already in their midst.” [Note: the NIV translation “within you” is questionable. Jesus would not tell the unbelieving Pharisees who were questioning Him that the kingdom was “within them.”] Jesus was thus declaring that the process of kingdom growth had started, so the Pharisees should not have assumed it was not yet present. People today also need to know that the kingdom, through the Church, is growing, but unfortunately, too many people, like the Pharisees, are blind to spiritual realities.

Furthermore, from the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus had presented Himself as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and promises concerning the Messiah. During a Sabbath day meeting in His home town, He had applied the words of Isaiah to Himself: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news [of the kingdom] to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year [the time] of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). In saying this, Jesus was presenting Himself as the Messiah/King of the kingdom. In this sense, Jesus was Himself the sign that the Pharisees rejected. For more than three years He had been exercising the power and authority of the Messiah/King over nature, disease, death, the devil. In spite of the fact that He presented the Pharisees with lots of evidence attesting to His identity as Messiah, His authority was not enough to convince them of His Messiahship (see *John 9:16; 11:47-48; 12:37*).

In addition, Jesus had taught about the characteristics of the kingdom. For example, people inside the kingdom were “to love their enemies, do good to those who hated them, bless those who cursed them, and pray for those who mistreated them” (*Luke 6:27-38*). Kingdom people were to have attitudes and behaviors which were radically different from the people of the world. The Pharisees saw no need for the humility, mercy, unselfishness, purity, righteousness, and priorities demanded by Jesus and, as a result, they never became kingdom insiders. This is exactly the position of cultural Christians (not genuine believers) today.

The indications of the kingdom of God were all around the Pharisees, but, in their spiritual blindness, they missed every clue — the miracles, the teachings, the authority, the fulfillment of Scripture. In spite of the evidence around them, and in spite of the evidence of God’s work revealed through Jesus, after more than three years of observation, they were still wondering, “When will the kingdom come?”

Too many people in the Christianized western world are like the Pharisees of 2000 years ago. In spite of the evidence available to them, through the Scriptures, the presence of church fellowships, the salt and light of believers, the power of prayer, etc., they don't and won't accept the evidence as truth. They have an inadequate spiritual understanding. Even when they try to be spiritual, they go about it in incorrect ways. In their spiritual blindness they remain kingdom outsiders.

With the disciples, Jesus was able to give a detailed explanation. In verse 22, Jesus turned to His disciples and for their benefit He began to answer the "when" question. Jesus could get beyond basic facts when speaking to His followers. They, unlike the Pharisees, had acknowledged the reality of Jesus. They had left their possessions and committed their lives to Jesus. They had been observers and participants with Jesus in many ministry opportunities. Jesus had shared His power and authority with them so that they had had the experiences of healing people and casting out demons. Peter had spoken for the twelve disciples when he forthrightly declared, "You are the Messiah of God" (*Luke 9:20*). They had no doubts about this. Some of them had been with Jesus at the time of His transfiguration, when they saw His glory and heard the voice of the Father, which gave them a first-hand glimpse into the kingdom of God (*Luke 9:27-36*).

We, as present day believers, must identify ourselves with the disciples who were with Jesus. Their knowledge, like ours, was limited and incomplete, but the orientation of their thoughts and lives was correct. For those who genuinely acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah/King, there is available an unlimited supply of spiritual help and encouragement, something the Pharisees and others outside the kingdom could never experience.

What did the disciples already know? You will recall that Jesus had, on several occasions, announced that He, the Son of Man, would be arrested, tortured, killed, and then be resurrected (*Luke 9:21-22; 9:44-45; 18:31-33*). There were other teaching times when Jesus explained that He would be going away, and that His followers must be continually ready for His return "because the Son of Man would come at an hour when they did not expect him" (*Luke 5:35; 12:40; 12:46*). The disciples had learned from Jesus that He would someday return "in His glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (*Luke 9:26*).

The disciples were well aware that the kingdom of God was already present, so Jesus did not focus on the present time. In His explanation He focused on the future. His first words were, "The time is coming." He then described this coming time as the decisive moment when "the coming of the Son of Man will be like the lightning which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other." His coming would be visible and recognizable by everyone, whether they were inside members of God's kingdom or not. All doubts about the person of Jesus would disappear in that literal flash of enlightenment.

However, before that day would come, Jesus said that His disciples would experience days of desperate longing for the Son of Man to appear. In the midst of persecution and stress, faithful disciples would greatly desire and hope for the return of Jesus in His glory to deliver them from their distress. In their eagerness to see Jesus again, some disciples might be inclined to chase after reports that He had appeared in some location or the other. Jesus warned His disciples that they must not be deceived by individuals who would claim that the "day of the Son of Man" had come. Jesus warned His disciples to not go investigate. Such claims would not be the real thing. Rather, the revelation of the Son of Man would be sudden and visible to everyone, like the lightning across the sky.

In verse 25 Jesus once again reminded the disciples of events that had to occur before His visible appearing in glory — He would first "suffer many things and be rejected by the then current generation." There would be suffering before glory. As God's chosen people, the Jews should have accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Actually, verse 25 can apply to every generation because the Messiah has been rejected by the majority of people through the centuries.

The word "must" in verse 25 is a reference to the plan and purposes of God which Jesus intended to fulfill. Before the time when the reality of God's kingdom could be universally established and known, it was absolutely necessary for the Son of Man to suffer and die. The theme of "suffering before glory" appears several times in the Gospel of Luke. This was the experience that Jesus was facing.

The references to Noah and Lot in verses 26-29 call attention to the suddenness and unexpectedness of Jesus' future return, as well as the outcome. The phrases, "eating and drinking," "marrying and being given in marriage," "buying and selling," "planting and building" describe the ordinary kinds of activities in which people will be engaged at the time of the revelation of the Son of Man. They will be so occupied with the earthly, material, and transitory activities of this life that they will not be concerned about and prepared for the Lord's return. Judgment will overtake such people suddenly and unexpectedly. Jesus used the word "destroyed" two times to describe the fate of people who were not inside God's kingdom.

In the last few verses of the passage, Jesus described what would happen at the time of His return. "On the day the Son of Man is revealed," there would be no time for anyone to gather personal possessions although many, apparently, will try to do so. Most people are so attached to material things that even in the time of crisis, they attempt to save their valuable possessions. Even at the apocalyptic moment of judgment at the end of this age they will think of saving their property. Lot's wife is an example of such people who foolishly and longingly look back to the things to which they are attached.

Jesus pointed out that the desire to preserve one's life is clear evidence that that person's life will be lost, but the person who is willing to lay down his/her life for the sake of Jesus and the kingdom will preserve it. In other words, if we identify with God while here on earth, and follow a kingdom lifestyle, suffering and persecution may result, but God will eventually grant us the fullness of His kingdom. Living for self results in the loss of the very self that one wants to preserve. As Jesus said in Luke 9:25 "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

When the Son of Man is revealed, the eternal destinies of people will also be revealed. Jesus gave two examples of what would happen. Individuals who are closely associated, whether in the home or at work, will be separated. "One will be taken and the other left." The context seems to indicate that those "taken" will enter a place of safety, like Noah, or be removed from the place of destruction, like Lot. The ones who are left behind will be destroyed.

Acceptance of Jesus as Messiah and acceptance of the reality of the kingdom of God is of paramount importance to every individual. A person's reaction to Jesus determines that person's eternal destiny. God has promised eternal life in His kingdom for individuals who will genuinely follow Him and His ways, but individuals who, like the Pharisees, go through life oblivious to the existence of God's kingdom, will face eternal destruction. Kingdom people will be prepared for Jesus' return regardless when it will occur. Each believer is expected to live now in the hope and certainty of Jesus' future return. We must live out the words we frequently pray: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

### **Some things to think about**

- \*The kingdom of God is now invisible and spiritual
- \*The kingdom of God will be universally recognized at the return of Jesus
- \*The kingdom of God can be experienced by people in this life
- \*Kingdom living will lead to salvation and deliverance