

# KINGDOM FIRST

**SERIES: ONE KINGDOM.  
INDIVISIBLE.**



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Gospel  
Fourth Message  
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## *Gospel*

On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress ratified a document they called the Declaration of Independence. These words explained why the original thirteen colonies on the East Coast of this continent were at war with England and established themselves as independent sovereign states. And so the history of this nation began.

Think about that moment—men gathered in a room together, agreeing on words. Once those words were agreed upon, and signatures were written on paper, nothing much was different in the world; a little more ink was spilled on a piece of paper.

But at the same time, everything hinged on that moment. Think about all the history which led up to that moment: the settling of the continent, the establishment of colonies, the tension with Great Britain, and eventually the war. And consider the history that has resulted from that moment—several centuries filled with moments of incredible achievement and times of profound failure.

Words on a paper. So much led up to those words. So much followed from them.

This week in our series called “One Kingdom. Indivisible.” we arrive at the turning point in the story of God’s kingdom. We look at that moment in history when God became incarnate, walked the earth as Jesus Christ, proclaimed the gospel, was killed by an angry mob, and rose to life in victory. So much history led up to his man’s life, and so much followed.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the central proclamation of the kingdom of God. The story before was all a prelude that foreshadowed that moment. The story since is people learning to live out the results. For those who follow Jesus, the gospel is their declaration not of independence, but dependence on Jesus Christ for redemption, identity, and salvation.

Before the proclamation of the gospel, the kingdom of God was focused on a particular nation. God chose an ethnic group whom he would bless so that his blessing

would extend to the whole world. The gospel opened up the kingdom of God to anyone who would believe in Jesus.

In fact, prior to the gospel, historian Larry Hurtado points out that religion was just an aspect of one’s ethnic or national identity. If you were from a particular region or part of a specific group, you worshipped their gods.

But with the proclamation of the gospel, he says “for the first time, you chose your religion regardless of your race and class. Also Christianity radically asserted that your faith in Christ became your new, deepest identity, while at the same time not effacing or wiping out your race, class, and gender. Instead, your relationship to Christ demoted them to second place.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the identity that we so deeply need to understand. We are first and foremost members of the kingdom of God. We still have other identities: political opinions, ethnic backgrounds, gender, social class, professional groups. But our identity in Christ surpasses all of those. So as we live in this world, our lives demonstrate our primary identity as kingdom first.

When Jesus began his ministry, he did so by announcing the arrival of a new kingdom. Matthew records him saying “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Mark puts it as “The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

We’ve spent a lot of time discussing the kingdom of God over the past few weeks, but we haven’t stopped to really define it. There are many ways to characterize the kingdom, but here’s a simple one I came across from a book by Jeremy Treat called *Seek First*. He says the kingdom is “God’s reign through God’s people over God’s place.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s a good definition because it draws together three aspects of the kingdom: the power, the people, and the place. The kingdom is where God reigns. It’s that realm or area where his rule is recognized and obeyed. A kingdom is defined by the power of its king.

But the kingdom is also the people who give their allegiance to that king. So the people of the kingdom of God consists of all those throughout history who follow Jesus. If you believe in Jesus, you are part of the kingdom of God.

Finally, a kingdom is a place where the people of the kingdom live out their allegiance to their king. It is “God’s place.” For us, this is where things get a bit nuanced. This creation is God’s place, but his reign is not yet fully recognized here. That’s why we sometimes talk about the kingdom as “already but not yet.” God’s reign has come to his people.

For now, the kingdom is a spiritual reality that will eventually be an earthly reality when Jesus returns. We live in the in-between. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “the kingdom of God is at hand.” It is here, and it is coming.

The purpose of this preaching series has always been to accomplish two things. First, to understand our unity in the kingdom of God. Second, to understand how we should relate to the world around us.

This morning, we’re going to see what Jesus has to say about each of these topics. We’ll look at a prayer that he offers for unity and an encounter where he is forced to take a political stand. We’ll close with some thoughts for today.

## Prayer for unity

As I pointed out earlier, up to this point, the kingdom of God has referred to a single ethnic and national identity: the Old Testament Jewish nation of Israel. Unity was important, but they already had a lot in common.

But when Jesus came preaching the gospel, he came for the whole world. John said that “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). Matthew said that “the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Matthew 24:14).

It’s one thing to unify people of the same nationality and ethnicity, but how do you unify people from all over the whole world?

Jesus began by picking the hardest possible combination of people in his day. In the first century Israel, there was one major political issue: the occupation of the Romans. The Roman Empire had annexed the land of Israel in 67 BC. Jesus began his ministry almost 100

years later. The tension between Rome and the Jews was constant and occasionally flared up into revolts.

By the time of Jesus, there were two major camps. Many people wanted to fight the Romans and re-assert their independence as the nation of Israel. There was a radical group called the Zealots who advocated violence against Romans. They incited rebellions and taught if everyone rose up, Israel could defeat Rome.

But others had given up on an independent state. They had made their peace with the Romans and just wanted to make life work. The most radical of that group were the ones who didn’t only accept Rome, they collaborated with them.

The worst of those were the tax collectors. They not only accepted Rome, but they also profited from it. They got rich from the pagan conquerors of Israel. Most Jews hated the tax collectors.

When Jesus chose his disciples, he chose Matthew the Tax Collector. A man who had helped line the Romans pockets with money—a man who had become wealthy from the taxes of ordinary Jews. Jesus also chose Simon the Zealot. Simon’s party would likely have targeted Matthew for abuse and even murder.

Jesus didn’t just pick people from different parties. He chose from the most radical side of each party. Can you imagine the amount of tension those disciples must have had as they travelled together for three years?

Why would Jesus pick these people? Why make it so hard on himself? Because he wanted to show that real unity is possible even when you start with completely different viewpoints. Not only is it possible, but it is also essential to the mission of the gospel. Did you hear that? Real unity is essential to the mission of the gospel. That’s why he prayed this way:

### John 17:15-21:

**I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that**

**they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**

We live in a world that is fractured by so many issues. I've been hearing stories of families torn apart by differing responses to the pandemic, to the racial justice issues in our culture, and the political divide. We saw it in the first week of our series when we looked at creation. All it takes is two people to form two camps and divide.

But Jesus does the opposite. He chooses people from the far ends of the political spectrum of his day, and he binds them together.

The degree of unity that he prays for is absolutely stunning. He asks "that they may be one just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you." Jesus prays that Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector may experience the same kind of unity that the Trinity enjoys. There is no higher standard for unity.

Jesus calls them to the highest unity, and he gives it the highest purpose: "so that all the world may believe that you have sent me." Our unity with each other isn't just for ourselves—it becomes a testimony to the world of who Jesus actually is. Wouldn't you want to know more about a King who could unite a Zealot and a Tax Collector?

The gospel draws us together in unity. We have to put unity first.

One of the most common questions I've received during this series is to understand who we are supposed to be unified with. Is everyone unified? Does unity mean that we agree with anyone? Are we unified with other denominations? Are we unified with other groups who claim to be Christians, like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons? Are we unified with other faiths: Jewish and Muslim and Hindu?

Usually, when you are defining a group, you draw a boundary around a certain class. If you're inside this boundary, you're in. If you're on the other side of the line, you're out. Jesus does create a standard of unity in this prayer. Not everyone is included.

Instead of a boundary, he gives the kingdom of God a center. Put simply, Jesus is at the center of the kingdom of God. We are unified with each other because we are "in Jesus." It's not a boundary of theology or politics or class. It's a centering of a relationship.

The kingdom of God is unified by faith in and relationship with Jesus Christ as our Redeemer and Savior. That doesn't mean that you can think anything you want about Jesus. The early church spent the first few centuries of their existence ironing out exactly who Jesus was. Their creeds, particularly the Nicene Creed, spell out who Jesus is.

But the creed is not a boundary of unity. I wouldn't say that I am unified with anyone who believes the Nicene Creed. I would say that I'm unified with anyone who knows the Jesus who is described by the Nicene Creed.

So Jesus gathers a diverse crew. It's a political time bomb. But he manages to unite them and send them into the world with a mission. How are they supposed to navigate their differences? What guidance does he give them? Let's look at one particular case to see what we can learn.

## **Willing to act**

Because the issue of the Roman occupation was so front and center during the first century, it was very natural to ask a travelling Rabbi his perspective. It would be the same kind of thing as if there were a local political leader in our culture, gaining a lot of attention. Someone might interview her and ask, "What's your opinion on gun control?"

That's the kind of situation that Mark records. But it isn't an innocent question. Mark describes the Pharisees, who were against Rome, coming together with the Herodians, who were aligned with Rome, to ask Jesus a question. Here's how it is described.

### **Mark 12:13-17:**

**And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. 14 And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" 15 But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a**

denarius and let me look at it.” 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar’s.” 17 Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they marveled at him.

There is a lot we could dig into in this little story. The important thing for us to understand is that this was meant as a trap. Rome required the people of Israel to pay taxes. Often these taxes were excessive and oppressive. But the Pharisees were religious purists. They still argued that the land belonged to Israel. To publicly affirm Rome’s taxes would be to legitimize their foreign power.

This puts Jesus in a dangerous spot. If he says not to pay taxes, the Herodians could have him arrested on the spot. If he says to pay taxes, the Pharisees could discredit him as a religious teacher and cast him as a collaborator. It was a lose-lose question.

But Jesus did something no one expected. In a multiple-choice test with two options, he manages to find a third. He doesn’t dodge the question. The implications of his answer are pretty clear: if the denarius has Caesar’s image on it, then give it back to him. But Jesus doesn’t only take a political stand.

He articulates a third way based on a recognition of the kingdom of God. He states a principle that no one can argue with, and he leaves it up to people to apply it for themselves. In fact, his “third way” actually forces them to go deeper—to do more than simply take a political position, but to think about their own identities. What about me does belong to Caesar? What belongs to God?

This is how living in the kingdom of God changes how we interact with the kingdom of this world. Nothing is simply captured by political statement or party lines. Everything requires us to know who we are and be led by the Spirit.

This third way of the kingdom is not at war with the forces of this world. The Pharisees were at war with Rome. Jesus didn’t take that perspective. He recognized that the spiritual kingdom of God was bigger than Rome. God wasn’t at war with Rome.

This is so important for us to understand. Some people think that the church is in a culture war with the world. We need to understand that the kingdom of God is not in a culture war with the kingdom of this world. Jesus is the King. His reign is already secure. We

are not engaged in a culture war to force people to live according to our values.

That’s the kind of trap that the Herodians and Pharisees wanted to lure Jesus into. But the way of the kingdom of God is a third way.

About a year ago, Tim Keller from Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York came out to the Bay Area. He spoke to a group of pastors before addressing a larger audience and shared this observation about the early church.

*The early church was known for being countercultural. They took positions on five topics that were in contrast with the Roman culture they lived in. They believed in:*

**The sanctity of life.** *Abortion was rare in their day; far more common was leaving unwanted infants out to die. Christians would rescue these infants and adopt them into their families.*

**Care for the poor.** *Many groups cared for the poor within their own families. But Christians cared for the poor outside their community. During plagues, while others fled the cities, they stayed behind to tend to the sick and dying.*

**Sexual Ethics.** *First-century culture was incredibly sexually. It was expected that men would have sex with people in lower social classes: slaves, prostitutes, and children. Christians believed that sex wasn’t about fulfilling an appetite but sharing an intimate connection with another person. Consequently, they believed sex belonged only within heterosexual marriage.*

**Racial justice.** *Early Christian communities were radically multi-ethnic. The church created a unity between races that was completely unknown within the first century.*

**Non-retaliation.** *The early church was heavily persecuted for the first few centuries. They were attacked, imprisoned, and killed. In contrast to everyone in the culture around them, Christians taught forgiveness and didn’t retaliate with violence against their enemies.*

*These five values were markers of the early church. None of them made sense in the first century. Today, two of them are considered to be values of the “right”: sanctity of life and sexual ethics. Two of them are considered to be values of the “left”: care for the poor and racial justice. Tim Keller pointed out nobody practices one of them: non-retaliation.<sup>3</sup>*

The kingdom of God doesn't fit within earthly categories. The Herodians and Pharisees tried to get Jesus to pick a side, but he refused.

Instead, Jesus drew their attention to the dual reality of Caesar's kingdom and God's kingdom, and he chartered a course for his followers to live faithfully in both of them. This is kingdom-first living.

Kingdom first is difficult to do. When it looks like there are two options before you, it takes a lot of wisdom and insight to find that third way. But nobody said following Jesus was easy. We need to depend on Christ. We need to listen to the Spirit. We need to dialog with each other to shape our opinions. This is the hard work of figuring out what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar.

This is what it means to be the kingdom of God.

What about today?

As a way of applying these stories, I'll give two practices for living as the kingdom of God in our world.

The first is to advocate for the truth.

One of the things Jesus prayed really struck me. He asked God to sanctify his people in truth. Literally, that's "set them apart in truth." Fundamentally, followers of Jesus believe in the truth. We have to be fiercely committed to the truth in all aspects of how we engage with the world around us.

It's easy to believe in the truth when someone you disagree with is lying. Everyone loves to do that.

But Christians ought to advocate for truth everywhere.

There are times when we deceive ourselves because we know the biblical story; we know how prone we are to self-deception. We see it in almost every biblical character. Who are we to think we are any different. We have to have a healthy degree of skepticism, even of our own perspectives.

There are times when the truth makes us look bad. We make mistakes. Or we don't handle a situation well. We have to be willing to own our mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Nothing is more in line with following Jesus than admitting when we are wrong and asking for forgiveness.

Finally, we have to be willing to call out the people "on our side" when they bend the truth. This is the big one. Just about everyone calls out their opponents and glosses over lies told by their own people.

If Christians are to find that third way to live, they have to call their own people to account when they bend the truth. When they do this, they will find that they don't fit into any political party because no one wants them. American politics is built on loyalty. You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.

But our loyalty is to the truth. That means we won't fit in anywhere.

This leads to my second suggestion. If we are to put kingdom first, we need to be careful of putting anything else first in our lives. There are all sorts of things that we might put first: family first; education first; even justice first. But in politics, one of the biggest temptations is to put our nation first.

We have to be careful of that. We can be patriots. We can be loyal to this great nation. But we are disciples first and patriots second. Our kingdom allegiance comes before our political alliance.

We are exiles and strangers, even here in America. There are versions of American nationalism from all political corners. Everyone has their vision of what America should be. But we cannot put America first. We have to put the kingdom first.

Again, this means that there are kingdom principles which challenge this nation. We have to reckon with parts of our history: the modern and ultimately empty philosophy of secular humanism that is so prevalent; our incredible and destructive divisiveness. The list goes on and on.

Both the Herodians and the Pharisees came to Jesus with their own version of nationalism. The Herodians favoring the kingdom of Rome and the Pharisees favoring the kingdom of Israel. But Jesus spoke of another kingdom.

Throughout history, nationalism has been one of the strongest political forces to draw followers of Jesus away from the kingdom of God and consume their focus on earthly power. If we know that, we can look out for it. That's what it means to live kingdom first.

## Conclusion

Our nation was founded by words written on a page and agreed to in a Declaration of Independence. When that happened, everything changed in this country.

The kingdom of God was founded when Jesus walked this earth and proclaimed that his kingdom was near. When his followers proclaimed that “Jesus is Lord” they were making a political statement: Jesus was the king of the only kingdom that really mattered. Earthly nations rise and fall, but the kingdom of God will stand forever.

To close us out, listen to the conclusion of one of the other pastors from a Chinese American church in San Francisco. Here are her thoughts:

*We have to be submitted to Jesus the King and His principles first. Led by the King, to be set apart from the world in its politics, issues, and governmental agendas. Now, does that give us a clear answer of what we render to Caesar? Do we revolt and throw our tea into the ocean? We don't get clear answers, but we know who our King is. He is a King of Justice and Peace. If we are gospel centered, we always have hope in the ultimate fulfillment of redemption and restoration.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Baylor University Press, 2016) and *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Marquette University Press, 2016), quoted in Tim Keller, “The early Christian “social project,” Redeemer Report, *Redeemer*, 2017, [https://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/the\\_early\\_christian\\_social\\_project](https://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/the_early_christian_social_project).
- 2 Jeremy Treat, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* (Zondervan, 2019), quoted in Jeremy Treat, “The Kingdom of God in 8 Words,” *The Gospel Coalition*, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-god-8-words/>.
- 3 Tim Keller, “Christian Unity in the Bay Area,” Lecture, Event from Transforming the Bay with Christ, Redeemer City to City, and Abundant Life Church, Mountain View, CA, September 6, 2018.