



*"Behold, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you." -Jesus (Luke 17:21)*

## Leader Resources

*In Jesus' first words that are recorded in the gospel of Mark, He spoke of this thing called the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is not a far off geographical location. The Kingdom of God is anywhere God is ruling and reigning. Throughout His ministry, Jesus invited people from all walks of life to participate in this new Kingdom. That invitation is still given to men and women today. We are able to participate in God's kingdom here in 21st century Northern California as we seek to join God in the work He is doing in our midst.*

*As you gather with your Missional Community during this Living in the Kingdom series, you're going to talk about what this looks like. What does it mean to participate in the Kingdom of God today? What did Jesus say the Kingdom of God*

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*is like? What do the cryptic stories that Jesus told have to say to us today? How do we join God in His work in the midst of busy schedules, stressful jobs, child rearing, personal doubts, and broken hearts? We hope these introductory resources, and the resources you will be given each week, will equip you to lead your Missional Community through these conversations. You don't need to become a Bible scholar or an expert in the parables to lead your group, and please remember that our entire Discipleship Department is here for you if you need any assistance (you'll find our email addresses in the resources at the end of this packet). We're here to support you so that you can focus on loving your group, leading conversations, and watching God work!*

*Please take a few minutes to read over these next few pages. You'll find resources for further study at the end if you want to dive deeper into any of these concepts.*

## Parables

**"All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, He said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.'" -Matthew 13:34-35**

**"Jesus and the rabbis of old taught about God using concrete illustrations that reach the heart through the imagination. They challenged the mind of the highest intellectual level by using simple stories that made common sense out of the complexities of religious faith and human experience." -Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation***

Jesus is a master teacher and a master storyteller. When we read the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), we see that much of Jesus' teaching comes in story form. We call these stories "parables." Parables are short stories that use objects and situations that are common to everyday life to provoke hearers to change their perspective and behavior.

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## LIVING IN THE KINGDOM GROUPS

They are both disarming in their simplicity and explosive in their ability to provoke. If we hear a parable and only nod our head in passive agreement, we likely haven't listened well enough. The parables invite us expand our understanding of what it means to participate in the Kingdom of God. They disorient us so that we can be reoriented around God's values instead of our culture's values. They challenge our assumptions, and invite us to see the world and our place in it in new and exciting ways.

Many of the parables Jesus told were narratives. That is, they are stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. There are characters and settings, and sometimes dialogue. These stories are short and they're meant to be easy to retell. The parables are meant to draw hearers in by describing settings and situations that would have been familiar to their hearers (if Jesus were walking the streets today, He may well tell parables that involve smartphones, grocery stores, and office buildings). But, each parable also contains an element of surprise, a hook, designed to provoke its hearers to consider a familiar situation differently. When Jesus told parables, they nearly always elicited a reaction from His audience. Sometimes people were intrigued and drawn in. Other times they were offended. Jesus' parables often get the same reaction from readers today. That's because a good parable is never meant to leave listeners indifferent. Parables might shock, inspire, or offend, *and that's the point*. As your groups meet together this fall, we hope that you can wrestle what these stories mean. We want to help you hear these stories in the way that Jesus' listeners would have heard them, and we want to equip you to work together to consider what these stories mean for us today.

Parables often have more than one meaning or application. Studying the parables is less about "figuring them out" and more about considering their wide-ranging implications and meanings. We don't get to simply make parables mean anything we want, but we also need to learn to get comfortable with the fact that often the meaning of a parable defies simple definition.

New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd tells how parables work in the gospels:

- (1) A parable is a comparison (a metaphor or simile)...
  - (2) ...describing something new or unknown in terms of something very familiar (drawn from nature or common experience)...
  - (3) ...with an unexpected twist (arresting in its strangeness)...
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## LIVING IN THE KINGDOM GROUPS

(4) ...designed to engage its hearers and prompt some reaction from them (leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its application to tease it into active thought).<sup>1</sup>

One easy way to categorize the parables is to arrange them topically. That said, because many parables address multiple topics, there is disagreement amongst scholars about how this arrangement can be done best.. One thing all scholars recognize, even when they categorize the parables in different ways, is that all of Jesus' parables revolve around one central theme: the Kingdom of God. Numerous parables explicitly begin with the phrase, "The Kingdom of God is like . . ." or something similar (Mt 13:24, 31 pars., 33 par., 44, 45, 47; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1; Mk 4:26).<sup>2</sup>

And that is relevant to our study this fall, because we're not simply studying stories. We are seeking, as communities, to let these stories draw us to greater understanding of the mysterious, beautiful Kingdom of God so that we can more fully participate in it.

# Kingdom

***"You cannot know anything about Jesus, anything, if you miss the Kingdom of God."***  
**-Gordon Fee**

"The Kingdom of God" is one of the most common themes in Jesus' teaching, and it is the most common subject of His parables. Throughout the gospels, He says, "The Kingdom of God is like..." and then proceeds to compare the Kingdom to a number of common items and situations. How are we to understand what Jesus meant when He spoke of "the Kingdom of God?" As 21st-century westerners, our personal experience with earthly kingdoms is non-existent. Life in our American representative democracy is certainly very different from life in the kingdoms of the first century. To further complicate things, first-century kingdoms were hardly conducive to peace and prosperity for ordinary citizens. They included unscrupulous tax collectors who overtaxed to line their own pockets, puppet rulers propped up by the Roman Empire, extraordinary wealth gaps between the rich and the

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<sup>1</sup> You can read further descriptions on pages 3-5 in Parables of the Kingdom, attached for you.

<sup>2</sup> You can read further on the central theology of the parables that emerges on pages 414-416 in Craig Blomberg's, *Interpreting the Parables*, IVP, 2012, attached for you.

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## LIVING IN THE KINGDOM GROUPS

poor, and unjust systems that benefited landowners and oppressed laborers. Furthermore, these kingdoms were always physical locations with physical borders.

If that's what earthly kingdoms looked like, how can we even use that word to describe the rule and reign of God? In order to use it, we need to reimagine its meaning. When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom, He was referring to wherever the rule and reign of God was felt. The Kingdom of God is less about governments, buildings, and territories, and the trappings of earthly authority, and more about hearts of people seeking to live their lives with God at the center. When we have the humility and faith to ask God to re-shape our values and priorities to align with His, we are entering the Kingdom of God.

If we are going to get an accurate picture of the Kingdom of God, it is helpful to understand how the word "kingdom" works in the Old and New Testaments. The primary meaning of both the Hebrew word *malkuth* in the Old Testament and of the Greek word *basileia* in the New Testament is, "The rank, authority and sovereignty exercised by a king." A kingdom may indeed be a realm over which a sovereign exercises their authority, or it can refer the people who belong to that realm and live under that authority. When we speak of the kingdom of God, it's important to also consider that it is an *enduring* kingdom. Though the earthly kingdoms of the first century have long since faded from view, the kingdom of God continues to expand today. When the "kingdoms" and civilizations of our present age exist only in history books, the kingdom of God will still stand.

New Testament scholar George Ladd was one of the first Christian writers to explain how the Kingdom of God belongs to the present as well as the future. He describes the Kingdom as the rule, the reign, the government of God in this age in the hearts and lives of those who yield themselves to Him, He sums it up in this way:

"The Kingdom of God is basically the rule of God. It is God's reign, the divine sovereignty in action. God's reign, however, is manifested in several realms, and the Gospels speak of entering into the Kingdom of God both today and tomorrow. God's reign manifests itself both in the future and in the present and thereby creates both a future realm and a present realm in which man may experience the blessings of His reign."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ladd, George. *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1959

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## LIVING IN THE KINGDOM GROUPS

Ladd's book is nearly 60 years old, but it remains a helpful resource for understanding the Kingdom of God and our place in it. Below you will find a few of the book's key ideas that we believe will be helpful to you as you seek to lead your Missional Community to engage with God's Kingdom today.

- The Word of God does say that the Kingdom of God is a present spiritual reality. At the same time, the Kingdom is an inheritance which God will bestow upon His people when Christ comes in glory.
  - The Kingdom is a realm into which the followers of Jesus Christ have entered. Paul writes that God has "delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). At the same time, the Kingdom of God is a future realm which we must enter when Christ returns. Peter looks to a future day when there "will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:11).
  - The Kingdom of God is His kingship, His rule, His authority. When this is once realized, we can go through the New Testament and find passage after passage where this meaning is evident, where the Kingdom is not a realm or a people but God's reign. Jesus said that we must "receive the kingdom of God" as little children (Mark 10:15). What is received? The Church? Heaven? What is received is God's rule. In order to enter the future realm of the Kingdom, one must submit themselves in perfect trust to God's rule here and now.
  - The mystery of the Kingdom is this: that the Kingdom which will one day change the entire external order has entered into this age in advance to bring the blessings of God's Kingdom to men and women without transforming the old order. The old age is going on, yet people may already enjoy the powers of The age to come. The kingdom of Satan still stands, but the Kingdom of God has invaded the kingdom of Satan. Men and women may now be delivered from this power, delivered from this bondage, delivered from the mastery of sin and death. This deliverance is accomplished because the power of the future kingdom of glory has come among people in a secret, quiet form to work in their midst.
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- Jesus came to give us life today— not only in the future at the end of the age, but now. Somehow the life of the age to come has come to us here and now while we are still in our mortal bodies living in the evil age. God has given us His Spirit as the first-fruits of the life to come in the resurrection. When Christ comes, we will receive the harvest—the fullness of life from God’s Spirit. But God has already given to us His Spirit as a first-fruits, a foretaste, an initial experience of that future heavenly life.
  - Has the realization gripped you that the very life of heaven itself dwells within you here and now? We live most of our life in terms of promise; we often sing of the future, and so we ought to sing. Our gospel is a gospel of glorious promise and hope. Yes, the best, the glorious best, is yet to be. And yet we are not to live alone for the future. The future has already begun. The age to come has reached into this age; the kingdom of God has come unto you. The eternal life which belongs to tomorrow is here today. The fellowship which we shall know when we see Him face to face is already ours, in part but in reality. The transforming life of the Spirit of God which will one day transform our bodies has come to indwell us and to transform our characters and personalities.

Our hope is that as you lead your groups, all of you will gain a clearer picture of what it looks like to participate in God’s Kingdom. As Jesus’ parables provoke and inspire us, we hope that the Spirit provides us with new understanding and insight so that we can live with greater Kingdom purpose. Thank you for joining us on this journey, and for giving your time and energy to lead others!

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### **Staff email addresses**

Brian Kiley, Director of Discipleship- [bkiley@bridgeway.church](mailto:bkiley@bridgeway.church)

Heather Johnson, Missional Communities Coordinator- [hjohnson@bridgeway.church](mailto:hjohnson@bridgeway.church)

Matt Bach, Director of Christian Development, [mbach@bridgeway.church](mailto:mbach@bridgeway.church)

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## **Books**

Blomberg, Craig. *The Theology of the Parables: The Kingdom and the Christ, Interpreting the Parables*. Vol. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012

Boice, James Montgomery. *The Parables of Jesus*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1983.

Getty-Sullivan, Mary Ann. *Parables of the Kingdom: Jesus and the Use of Parables in the Synoptic Tradition*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007.

Ladd, George. *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1959.

Newton, Doug. *Fresh Eyes on Jesus' Parables: Discovering New Insights in Familiar Passages*. Fresh Eyes Series, 2018.

## **Articles**

A helpful overview of what the Kingdom is: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/what-was-the-message-of-jesus/>

Two overviews of the biblical understanding of Kingdom:

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/kingdom-of-god.html>.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/christ-reigns-over-all-biblical-survey-of-gods-kingdom>

A short article showing the connection between Jesus and the Kingdom:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/10-connections-between-jesus-and-the-kingdom-of-god/>

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## **The Kingdom of God is Where He Rules.**

***Note: We have provided you with more questions than you will likely need. Please don't feel pressure to talk about every question. Use the ones that you feel will be most useful in generating discussion in your group. We've designed this curriculum to be as user-friendly as possible. We've divided each week into “Hear,” “Discuss,” and “Apply” sections. In the different sections there will be passages of Scripture to read, notes to read to your group, and questions to ask.***

### **Icebreaker**

#### **Ask**

Think of a time when you have a bad boss or teacher. What made it hard to follow their leadership? What do you look for in someone you'll follow or take orders from?

What stuck out to you from the sermon?

#### **Hear**

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## Say

In this clip from the sermon, Pastor Lance is talking about the Lord's Prayer. He talks about how it is a prayer for the present, and not just the future.

## Ask

What sort of experience do you have with the Lord's Prayer?

## Play

The video clip can be found at [www.bridgeway.church/litk](http://www.bridgeway.church/litk)

## Ask

- What sort of understanding of the Kingdom of God are you bringing into this series?
- What does it look like for the Kingdom of God to be present here on earth?
- How can our lives be different if we live with an awareness that the Kingdom of God is something we can participate in today?
- What questions do you have about the Kingdom of God? What elements of it are confusing or interesting to you? *Leader's note: You don't need to be able to answer everyone's questions. The purpose of this question is to allow the group to share their questions with each other.*

## Discuss

### Read

Psalm 47:1-9

### Ask

- What do we observe about the nature of God as King? What attributes of God in this passage stick out to you and why?
  - What does this passage tell us about what God's followers are like?
  - Pastor Lance talked about how we don't live in a society that is led by a king. Our reality is very different from the reality of the people who would have first read this psalm. How does our cultural context make it difficult to understand God as our king?
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## Say

Pastor Lance said that Jesus' life exemplified Kingdom living. As we look to the life of Jesus we will begin to see what Kingdom living looks like, and we will see how we can learn from Jesus as we seek to participate in the Kingdom today.

## Read

Matthew 4:17-25

## Ask

- What does it mean that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand?" What does it mean for us today?
- What are some specific ways that Jesus demonstrated the Kingdom when He was on earth? What can we learn from His example? What questions or tensions does this raise for you?
- Pastor Lance said that God's Kingdom is experienced on earth when His people are obedient to Him on earth. Lance described the Church as "God's people demonstrating little pieces of heaven here on earth." What can this look like practically in your day to day life?

## Apply

### Ask

- Pastor Lance talked about how we live in the tension of the "now and not yet" (*leader's note: make sure everyone understands what this means...spend a few moments talking about it if needed*), how do you see that tension in our world today?
- Pastor Lance said that we are living out a "tame" version of the Kingdom. Do you think that is true? What would it look like to change that, both personally and as a church family?
- Living as part of God's Kingdom includes surrendering to our King. We talked and sung about surrendering to God in church this weekend. What are some practical and specific ways that we can live as surrendered people?

## Close

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- Real blessings from God aren't only in the future, they are here and now as we live as ambassadors of His Kingdom. Close your time praying as a group asking God to teach us how to live as His people in His Kingdom here at Bridgeway.
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