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THE KINGDOM OF GOD—OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE TO THE LORD

The kingdom of God is very much in God's heart and is central to the fulfilment of His purposes. It is a major theme in the Scriptures and in the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

In this message, we will reflect on some teachings of the Lord Jesus concerning the kingdom of God to understand how important the kingdom is to the Lord and to appreciate some key issues pertaining to this kingdom.

The kingdom of God—a central theme in the teachings of Christ

In Luke 4:43, the Lord Jesus said: "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose." This statement reveals that preaching the kingdom of God was a primary burden of His heart and an important aspect of His mission on earth.

The Lord Jesus preached the kingdom of God right from the beginning of His ministry. And throughout His ministry, He constantly spoke about the kingdom of God: what it is like, how one can have a part in it, how it grows, and what values, perspective, attitudes and conduct should characterise those in the kingdom of God. He continued to do so even after His resurrection and before His ascension. During that period of forty days, He spoke to His disciples "the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Conditions for entering God's kingdom

The Lord Jesus began His ministry in Galilee after His baptism and the temptations in the wilderness. Mark 1:14-15 records that He preached the gospel and said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." He calls us to repent and believe in the gospel as these are the conditions for entering His kingdom.

The Lord Jesus also spoke of the conditions for entering God's kingdom in a conversation He had with Nicodemus the Pharisee, as recorded in John 3.

John 3:3-7

3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

In verses 3 and 5, the Lord Jesus made two important statements to Nicodemus: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" and "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God". Although Nicodemus was not asking the Lord Jesus specifically about seeing or entering the kingdom of God, the Lord saw it necessary to address this critical issue. Indeed, it is *the* critical issue of life for all fallen men.

The Lord Jesus emphasised the need for us to be born again, to be born of the Spirit, because the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom and we have to be born of the Spirit to enter it.

To live a life of true meaning and purpose, we must first enter the kingdom of God. This is the beginning of a new life in Christ, a life of moral and spiritual transformation and growth.

The Sermon on the Mount

The discourse of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5 to 7, commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount, reveals how we can experience a life of true blessedness. It is an outstanding sermon that contrasts the emphasis of God's kingdom with that of the world. This sermon helps us appreciate the kind of values, attitude, approach and conduct that are important to the Lord.

We ought to carefully study the profound truths taught in this discourse and assimilate them into our lives. In this message, I will only make brief references to this discourse.

Important qualities of heart and spirit

The Lord Jesus addresses the Sermon on the Mount to His disciples (Matt. 5:1-2). He began by teaching His disciples the important qualities that God's children should have. He says:

Matthew 5:3-10

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The qualities described here—being poor in spirit, being gentle, being merciful, being pure in heart, having a hunger for righteousness—are moral issues of the heart.

The scribes and Pharisees paid much attention to religious practices and scrupulously observed them. They offered long prayers and gave tithes dutifully. They spent many hours studying the Mosaic Law and were eager to teach others. Yet the Lord Jesus denounced them because they did all their deeds to be noticed by men. While they appeared outwardly righteous, inwardly they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matt. 23: 5, 28). Let us heed the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:20: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Our righteousness must go beyond outward appearance; it must consist of the qualities of the heart and spirit, like those the Lord spoke about in Matthew 5:3-10. It is only when we have these qualities that we can bear good fruit in our lives. Let us therefore diligently develop these inner moral qualities in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, who seeks to help us in this direction.

The path of true discipleship

A similar passage in Luke 6 shows us that these inward moral qualities are manifested and developed in the path of true discipleship.

Luke 6:20-26

20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

22 "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man.

23 "Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets.

24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.

25 "Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

26 "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.

People would generally regard laughing, being rich, well-fed and well-spoken of as very desirable. Indeed, many would eagerly seek such things. They would try to avoid having to weep, being poor, going hungry, or being ostracised. It would be hard for them to see such conditions as blessed. The words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 6 may therefore seem puzzling.

Why is it a blessing to weep, to be poor, hungry, hated and ostracised? Why is it woe to laugh, to be rich, well-fed and well-spoken of? What is the meaning of the words of the Lord Jesus?

As in the Sermon on the Mount, these words of the Lord Jesus are addressed to His disciples (v. 20).

Verse 22 helps us see that the Lord was teaching His disciples *the path of true discipleship*. The disciples would be blessed if the trials and difficulties they had to go through were *for the sake of the Son of Man*. It is not hunger or weeping or being ostracised in themselves that is blessed, but suffering for the Lord's sake, in the path of true discipleship.

The path of true discipleship often involves suffering and unpleasant experiences. But the Lord exhorts us to "be glad... and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven" (v. 23). The Lord Jesus is in effect saying: Do not be troubled. You may be poor and hungry, you may weep, and people may hate you, but if all these take place because you are true to Me and because you seek after righteousness, you are blessed.

However, if we are concerned about having a pleasant life, becoming wealthy and receiving the praises of men, we may compromise our faith and deviate from the path of discipleship. This is a serious matter. The Lord Jesus pronounces "woe to you" (vs. 24-26) to those who choose this path in life.

Seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness

In Matthew 6:33, the Lord Jesus teaches His disciples how they should live their lives:

Matthew 6:33

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The Lord Jesus exhorts us to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness. Seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness are of supreme importance and they are inextricably linked. We cannot be seeking His kingdom without at the same time desiring a life of righteousness. As Paul puts it, "the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

As we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, we will be seeking God Himself and developing our relationship with Him and with those who are in His kingdom. Deepening our relationship with God is the way to true righteousness and the development of our moral character. And as we develop the quality of righteousness and our moral character, it will in turn nurture the quality of our relationship with God and with the brethren. We must pay careful attention to all these inter-related aspects, for they are the primary issues in God's kingdom.

In Matthew 6:33, the Lord Jesus also addresses those who may be anxious over their earthly needs. He assures them that if they seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, "all these things will be added to you". Our heavenly Father knows what we need and we can trust Him to provide for us. When we earnestly seek Him, we can experience true blessedness. However, such a sense of assurance of God's provision would not be valid if we fail to truly seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. It would be a false sense of assurance.

Submission to God and meaning of "kingdom of God"

In Matthew 7:21, the Lord Jesus warns, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." We cannot enter God's kingdom by mere profession of our lips. True obedience is what the Lord is looking for. If we acknowledge Him as "Lord", we must seek to obey Him and be true to Him. This does not mean that we will not fail or falter, but it does mean that we sincerely want to honour Him and submit to Him, even if that would result in our becoming poor materially or being ostracised.

Submission to the will of God, whatever it involves, is a key feature of what it means to be in God's kingdom. This point helps us understand the meaning of the expression "the kingdom of God".

The kingdom of God is a moral and spiritual kingdom. In this kingdom, God reigns as King, and all who are in His kingdom must submit to His righteous kingship. Submission to God's kingship begins while we are on earth, for all true Christians are already in God's kingdom. This attitude and posture of submission to God is voluntary and is a requirement for our entering God's kingdom and having a part in it. We enter His kingdom through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This involves turning away from a self-directed, self-seeking life to one of submission to His lordship.

As we submit to the will of the perfect God, we will experience a life of spiritual abundance and fruitfulness. It is a truly satisfying life, one that is according to His kind intention, which He purposed in Christ (Eph. 1:9). We can say that the heart of what God seeks to teach us in the Scriptures pertains to His kingdom, how we can have a part in it and how we ought to work out our lives in it, in submission to His reign.

Teaching the kingdom of God through parables

The Lord Jesus constantly preached and taught about the kingdom of God in various ways. He wants to impress upon us its significance so that we will know how we should live in this fallen world.

For example, He told many parables to help us understand various things pertaining to the kingdom of God. I will refer to some of these parables and make brief comments on them.

Acceptance into God's kingdom

We have seen that entering the kingdom of God is critical, but the Lord tells us that not everyone will be able to enter it. Only those who are accepted by the Lord may enter. The Lord Jesus told a parable in Matthew 22:2-14 to illustrate this point.

In this parable, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son and invited many to attend.

In verses 11-13, we are told that a man who attended the feast "was not dressed in wedding clothes". The king ordered his servants to bind this person and cast him out into the outer darkness. The rejection of this man who had no proper clothes is a sober reminder that unless we are "clothed" with Christ (Gal. 3:27), we will not be accepted into His kingdom. Entry into God's kingdom is *on God's terms*, not ours. We need to repent so that we may be forgiven of our sins and washed by the blood of the Lamb. We are acceptable to God only in Christ, who bore the punishment due to us.

There are reasons why various ones may have no place in God's kingdom. One of the reasons is addressed in another parable recorded in Luke 14:16-24.

Luke 14:16-24

16 But He said to him, "A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many;

17 and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.'

18 "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.'

19 "Another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.'

20 "Another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.'

21 "And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at

once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.'

22 'And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.'

23 'And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled.

24 'For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.'"

Those invited made excuses not to go to the dinner. They said that they had other matters to attend to. One said he needed to look at his newly purchased property; another wanted to try out his oxen; and yet another had married a wife. Well, none of those invited, declared the man, shall taste of his dinner (v. 24).

While such earthly matters as buying a piece of land, trying out the oxen and getting married may be legitimate, the Lord is warning us through this parable that we may have no place in God's kingdom if we are *preoccupied* with the affairs of this life and fail to heed God's call.

This reminds us of the Lord's warning of the conditions that will prevail at His Coming again. Like in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man (Luke 17:26). This is also true today. Many are entangled in the affairs of the world—buying, selling, marrying, being given in marriage—and fail to respond positively to God's call to enter His kingdom.

Be ready for the Second Coming of Christ

The Lord Jesus also told parables concerning readiness for His Second Coming.

In our time on earth, the most important thing is to enter God's kingdom and, having entered it, to be ready for the Second Coming of Christ. How ready we are for His Second Coming depends on how we live our lives now, and that in turn will affect our status and life in God's eternal kingdom.

In the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1-13, the Lord Jesus warns us of the need to *be alert and ready* for His Coming again. He begins the parable with these words:

Matthew 25:1-4

1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

2 "Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent.

3 "For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them,

4 but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps.

The five wise virgins prepared themselves for the bridegroom while the foolish ones did not and were not allowed in, thus missing the wedding feast. Concerning His Second Coming, the Lord says, "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour" (v. 13). Thus, we ought to be ready at all times for the Lord's Second Coming, and not be foolish like the five virgins who were caught unprepared and missed the important event of the wedding feast.

How to be ready for the Second Coming

The parable of the ten virgins is immediately followed by the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30.

This parable tells of a man who, about to go on a journey, entrusted his possessions to his slaves until his return. He entrusted five talents to one slave, two talents to another and one to the third slave, each according to his ability. When he returned, he asked them to give him an account of what they did with the money entrusted to them. The one who was entrusted with five talents gained five more talents and was commended, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 21). The one who received two talents gained two more, and was commended in like manner.

But the one who was entrusted with one talent said to the master, "I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours" (vs. 24-25). This was the slave who was unfaithful and lazy, a "worthless slave". He was reprimanded and rejected by his master while those who were faithful and diligent were given more (vs. 26-30).

This parable conveys to us not only the importance of being ready for the Second Coming of Christ but also *how to be ready*. We can be ready by being good stewards of what the Lord has entrusted to us. While awaiting His return, we must be diligent and faithful in fulfilling the responsibilities God has entrusted to us.

Several parables in Matthew 13 illustrate issues pertinent to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. We will consider some of them.

How do we respond to the word of the kingdom?

The Lord Jesus tells the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-8 and explains its meaning in Matthew 13:18-23. This parable is also recorded in Luke 8:5-8, 11-15.

This parable tells of a man who sowed seeds on four different kinds of soil, each kind of soil producing a different result. Some seeds fell beside the road, some upon rocky places, some among the thorns, and some on the good soil (vs. 3-8).

The Lord Jesus explains that the seed represents the “word of the kingdom” (v. 19), that is, truth concerning the kingdom of God. The soil on which the seed was sown is the man hearing the word.

The soil beside the road represents the hearer who does not understand the word of the kingdom, and whatever he has heard is snatched away by the evil one (v. 19). The rocky places represent the hearer who responds enthusiastically but superficially. Because of the lack of depth in his response to the word of the kingdom, he falls away from the faith when things get difficult (vs. 20-21). The thorny ground represents the hearer whose life proves unfruitful because he is overcome by the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of riches (v. 22). Finally, the good soil speaks of one who listens attentively to the word of the kingdom, understands it and responds to it wholeheartedly. In him, the word of the kingdom bears bountiful fruit (v. 23). Luke 8:15 tells us that these are the ones who have heard the word in an *honest* and *good* heart and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.

Though it is known as the parable of the sower, this parable can also be appropriately referred to as the parable of the four soils or four grounds because its emphasis is on the four different kinds of ground on which the seed fell. The thrust of this parable is *how we should respond* to the word of the kingdom.

When the word of God is communicated to us, how do we respond? Do we seek to understand it and respond to it deeply, thus bearing fruit, or do we respond to it only superficially, thus bringing no fruit to maturity? How we respond to the word of the kingdom has implications of eternal significance.¹

There will be a day of reckoning and differentiation

The Lord Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13:24-30 and explains its meaning in Matthew 13:37-43.

In this parable, He compares the kingdom of heaven to a man who sowed good seed of wheat. But the enemy came along and sowed tares among the wheat (vs. 24-25). Both were allowed to grow until harvest time (v. 30).

The Lord Jesus explains that the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world. The good seed refers to the sons of the kingdom and the tares to the sons of the evil one. The one who sows the tares is the devil (vs. 37-39).

This parable helps us to understand that in the present age, there are both sons of the kingdom of God and sons of the evil one. For now, the Lord allows both to carry on. But in the future, there will be *a day of reckoning and differentiation*. At that time, the tares will be bound up and burnt, that is, the sons of the evil one, who are stumbling blocks and who commit lawlessness, will be thrown into the furnace of fire

¹ The parable of the sower is considered in greater detail in the messages on *Good Hearers* (AR91-94), which can be found on the website www.godandtruth.com.

(vs. 40-42). However, the wheat will be gathered into the barn, that is, the sons of the kingdom, the righteous ones, will have a meaningful part in God's heavenly kingdom and will "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (v. 43). To emphasise the importance of this reality, the Lord Jesus tells another parable in Matthew 13:47-50.

In this parable, He compares the kingdom of God to a "dragnet cast into the sea and gathering fish of every kind" (v. 47). The good fish are gathered into containers while the bad ones are thrown away. So it will be at the end of the age when the angels shall come and remove the wicked from among the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire.

During this age both the children of God and those who are not live together on this earth. But a time will come when a distinction will be made between those who are acceptable to God and those who are not; a separation will also take place between them. Whether we respond positively or negatively to the gospel of the kingdom of God is critical and has eternal implications.

Growth in the kingdom of God

Growth in the kingdom of God is another important issue that the Lord Jesus taught by way of parables. In Matthew 13:31-32, the kingdom is compared to a mustard seed. And in Mark 4:26-29, the Lord Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a man who casts seed upon the soil, but does not know how the seed sprouts and grows.

Both of these parables speak of growth in the kingdom of God. In the first parable, the mustard seed, though smaller than all the seeds sown, grows and becomes larger than all the garden plants. In the same way, what is happening in the kingdom may at times appear to be insignificant, but it may have the potential to grow considerably.

In the second parable, the man does not know how the seed sprouts and grows and produces a crop. Similarly, we may not always understand fully what exactly is happening and how growth takes place in the kingdom of God. Yet there are spiritual principles involved. It has to do with God at work and an important aspect has to do with how much freedom He has to work in and through us so that growth can occur. This in turn depends on the longing, direction and attitude of our heart.

The preciousness and supreme importance of the kingdom of God

Two short parables in Matthew 13:44-46 show us the attitude we should have towards the kingdom of God.

Matthew 13:44-46

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls,
46 and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

The kingdom is likened to a treasure, which a man found in a field and, with great joy over it, sells all that he has and buys that field. It is also likened to a merchant who, likewise, sells all that he has to buy the pearl of great value.

These two parables are meant to impress upon us that the kingdom of God and the things concerning His kingdom are of such incomparable value and significance that we should give our all for it.

Do we have such an attitude? Is the kingdom of God so precious and important to us that we will seek it with all our hearts? The degree to which such a spirit and longing is present in us is of utmost importance. It will have a direct bearing on the outcome of our lives. It will determine how well we will grow and how much we can contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom.

Knowing the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven—our great privilege

Having heard the Lord speaking in parables, His disciples asked Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" The Lord replied, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted" (Matt. 13:11). The Lord Jesus highlights the great privilege His disciples had to gain insight into the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 13:13, 16-17

13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

16 "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

17 "For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The mysteries of the kingdom were revealed to His disciples then, and have been revealed to us today through the Scriptures. But although revealed, they are not always understood. Non-believers will not be able to truly appreciate the mysteries of God's kingdom. It does not mean, however, that believers will automatically have an insight into the mysteries of the kingdom of God. Our attitude will affect our insight into the truth. The more serious we are in seeking to understand the mysteries of the kingdom, the more insight into the truth we will gain. The more superficial our life is, the less insight into the truth we will receive.

In one sense, we are even more privileged than the disciples to whom the Lord Jesus addressed those words, for we now have the whole of the Scriptures. It is God's desire that we gain insight into these deep things of His kingdom, things which the prophets and righteous men longed to understand, but were not granted the privilege in their time.

But how do we respond to the opportunity and privilege given to us? Do we earnestly seek to understand God's revelation in the Scriptures? Sadly, even though God intends that we gain deep insight into the mysteries of His kingdom, and has made every provision for us to do so, many of God's children remain in relative ignorance.

Having a forgiving spirit

The Lord Jesus also told parables to emphasise the importance of those in God's kingdom showing *love and kindness* to others.

When Peter asked Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" His reply was, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:21-22).

The Lord Jesus then used a parable to illustrate the importance of having a forgiving spirit. He compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who released one of his slaves from a very huge debt. However, this same slave had no compassion on his fellow slave who owed him a much smaller amount of money and had him imprisoned because he was unable to repay the debt. The response of the king is recorded in verses 32-34:

Matthew 18:32-34

32 "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'

34 "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him."

The Lord Jesus ended the parable with these words: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (v. 35).

God has forgiven us much. Do we also have a forgiving spirit towards others? The principle of forgiveness reflected in this parable can apply to other areas like patience, kindness and grace. In spite of our weaknesses, failures and slowness to learn, God has been very patient towards us. Are we patient towards others? We have tasted of God's bountiful grace and unceasing love towards us. Are we gracious and loving towards others? God expects us to have, in humility and gratitude to Him, such an attitude towards others, including those who may have wronged or hurt us. Failure in these areas reflects our inward state and would have adverse effects on our own relationship with God.

Correct attitude and approach to service

In another parable, Matthew 20:1-16, the Lord Jesus illustrates the correct attitude and approach to service that those in His kingdom should have.

This parable likens the kingdom of heaven to a landowner who hired labourers at different times of the day for his vineyard. Early in the morning, he agreed with a group of labourers to pay them a denarius for the day's work. He went out again at different times of the day and hired other groups of workers for his vineyard. At the end of the day, the landowner instructed his foreman to pay all the labourers, beginning with the last group (vs. 1-8).

Those who were hired much later in the day received a denarius each. When the turn came for those hired first to be paid, they thought that they would receive more; but they also received a denarius each. Unhappy, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, "These last men have only worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." But he reasoned with one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" (vs. 9-15).

This parable highlights to us the importance of our attitude and the way we approach service, our expectations and how we regard others. Note that those who were hired first were not happy and they grumbled because they expected to be rewarded more than those who were hired last.

What about us? What is our attitude when we serve God? Is our eye envious because the Lord is generous towards others? We should not begrudge the Lord's generosity towards others, but learn to take our proper place in His kingdom. It is God's prerogative to reward us and treat us as He sees fit, for it is lawful for Him to do what He wishes with what is His own (v. 15).

At the same time we know that God does not act arbitrarily. All His actions reflect His perfect character and attributes, including His perfect wisdom and love.

It is important for us to grow and fare well in God's kingdom. *We must not assume all is well with us just because we have been Christians for many years and have laboured long and done many things in the Lord's vineyard.* God is deeply concerned about our character and the attitude with which we seek to serve Him. Let us therefore ensure that we are faring well and that He is pleased with us in these areas.

Identifying with the heart of the Lord

From the many scriptural passages referred to in this message, we can see that the teaching and ministry of the Lord Jesus centred on the kingdom of God. That was His primary concern when He came to earth. His death on the cross, which was the climax of His life and ministry, is vitally related to this primary concern in His heart. So deep was His concern for the kingdom of God that even after His resurrection, He continued speaking to His disciples about it.

Acts 1:3

To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

As the kingdom of God is of primary significance to the Lord, it should also be of similar significance to us. The kingdom of God must be as priceless and important to us as the pearl of great value was to the merchant such that we would devote our whole life to it and all that pertains to it. Is this true of your life?

Christ is King in the kingdom of God; He came into this world to testify to the truth. Those who are of the truth hear His voice (John 18:37). Let us be those who are of the truth. Let us hear the voice of the King and follow Him.

But how can we do so when we are living in a fallen world? In the next message, we shall look at how we should live our lives on earth as citizens of heaven, mindful of the fact that we are in the kingdom of God and in the fallen world at the same time.

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