

**Sermon**    October 1, 2023  
[Philippians 2:1-13 , Matthew 21:23-32]

*Will You Enter the Kingdom of God?*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God, the Creator and Source of our lives, and from Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Amen.

Last week, some of you heard me preach a sermon that wasn't written, or rather didn't come from human origin, to use the Gospel's language. It was produced by ChatGPT; it was a write-up based on sermons I've previously given, using AI.

After the service, I was encouraged. I was encouraged because people noticed the difference between a robot priest and an actual pastor. They said, "That sermon was too short. That's not you." They said, "That sermon lacks depth. That's not you." And several said, "That sermon didn't challenge us. And that's not you."

Well, today I am going to challenge you. I'm going to challenge you with something some of you may have never heard before. I'm going to call into question the very reality of Heaven and Hell, from a Christian Biblical perspective. (God, I hope this isn't my last sermon. Like "That's it, Peterson, we're done!")

Will you enter the Kingdom of God?

"Will you enter the Kingdom of God?" That's an unusual question, isn't it? I'll bet not a single person here today has ever been asked this question. And with good reason. Modern Christians have grown accustomed to thinking of salvation in terms of Heaven and Hell. Instead of asking whether a person will "enter the coming Kingdom of God," *we* ask – and I hear this sometimes at funerals – "Will that person go to heaven after he or she dies?" "Will they be saved?" Not only from what the Apostle Paul calls the wrath of God in *this* world, but from the fire and eternal torment of Hell, that is the weeping and gnashing of teeth in the next.

We see the question on billboards, even here in Seattle. We hear it from preachers on television. And some of us, myself included, have been asked it by concerned friends or relatives, street preachers or evangelists: "Are you saved? Will you go to Heaven after you die?"

One of those conversations I remember vividly. I was in a coffee shop when I was in graduate school; a big collection of Luther's writings with a picture of Martin Luther was on the table in the coffee shop. Someone came up to me, it sparked a conversation; by the end of it I learned from her that she grew up an Evangelical, thinking that Lutherans were imposters. We're not real Christians. Why? Because we haven't

focused on the need to accept Jesus for the sake of going to Heaven after we die. "Imposters." I like that.

Now, the reason we think and speak in these terms, that is, of salvation in terms of Heaven and Hell, is that we've been conditioned by centuries of Christian tradition, from the European preoccupation with Hell throughout the Middle Ages, as evident in the artwork of the time, as well as Dante's *Inferno*, to the revivals that swept through the American colonies beginning in the 1730s. We have been conditioned to think of salvation *vertically*. Heaven is up there, and Hell is beneath our feet (which I think would be the Fellowship Hall, if I'm not mistaken). Heaven is up there. Hell is down there, and we are in the middle. The only way, in turn, to go up instead of going down is, as I said, to "accept Jesus as your Lord and personal Savior," the words of which *never appear* in the entire 27 books of the New Testament. Hmm.

Now the problem with defining salvation as "going to Heaven after we die" is that with just a few exceptions, it's *totally foreign to the New Testament*, not to mention our Creeds. Consider the Apostle Paul. "Do you not know," he asks in 1 Corinthians 6, "that wrongdoers will not inherit the Kingdom of God?" Indeed, Paul never mentions Hell in *any* of the letters he wrote, including our Second Reading, where we hear of how "every knee will bend to Jesus in heaven and on earth and under the earth." There is no reference to suffering or hellfire there; Paul simply referring to what the Jews would have called Sheol, or the abode of the dead. For Paul, we are saved, moreover, not from Hell, but from death. As Romans 5:12 puts it, sin made it possible for death to enter the world; Jesus overcame death in and through the cross and resurrection. On those rare occasions where Paul *does* mention Heaven, as he does in Philippians 3, he says it's *from* there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We see the same thing in Matthew 21, our Gospel reading for today. I want you to hear what I've said: I've argued so far that *Kingdom talk* belongs to the New Testament, but the language of Heaven and Hell are rare, if not for the most part entirely absent from, the New Testament. That's pretty crucial. Let's see if we can work this out.

The first part of our reading today focuses on how Jesus outsmarts the chief priests and the elders, that is, the religious leaders of the day, men in positions of power. Jesus then proceeds to tell a parable, one that illustrates how in God's emerging kingdom, "the first will be last and the last will be first." Those who have power and prestige will lose it. And those who lack these things will gain it.

The story concludes with a prediction. Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you." You hear there what Jesus says? There's no reference to Heaven or Hell. Instead, everyone mentioned will be entering the forthcoming *Kingdom*. That is, the tax collectors and prostitutes, *followed* by the chief priests and elders. Those at the bottom of the social

economic hierarchy of the time will go first, Jesus says; those with power and prestige, on the other hand, will be divested or emptied of their power and prestige. In figurative language, they'll go to the back of the line. Justice will be served. Equality and harmony will reign. Dignity and the humanity of the lowly, the despised and the oppressed, not to mention the outsider, will be restored, as the old, all-too-human hierarchies, of rich over poor, and male over female, crumble and fade away. Such is the nature of the upside-down Kingdom of God, a transformation of society that for Jesus, like Paul, lies *ahead* of us, instead of above us.

Who, then, will enter the coming Kingdom of God? That's the question Jesus asks and answers in today's parable. It's not whether we're going to Heaven or Hell after we die. The good news is that *no one* in Jesus's parable will be excluded from God's coming Kingdom. Justice will be served moreover, insofar as hierarchy itself will be dismantled. Everyone, in short, will be on the same level before God. To divorce Jesus from the socio-political implications of his message is to ignore the New Testament, especially as given in our Gospel reading for today.

Now, as a community of faith, we should be asking a related question: How can we as a congregation *anticipate* the coming Kingdom Jesus proclaims? How can we live or lean into it? How can we practice and rehearse for it in our life together, so that we might offer the world a counter-example of what it means to live as one in Christ, in peace with one another, and in harmony with one another?

For an answer to that question, I invite you to turn to our Second Reading for today. Here the Apostle Paul gives a blueprint in the present life, for the life of the world to come. Listen closely to verses 3-4. "Do nothing," Paul writes, "from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves," That has no place in corporate America. "Let each of you look not to your own interests" – that has no place in me-first society – "but to the interests of others."

What does this mean? Paul is saying that we, as Christians, should treat one another with dignity and respect. We should regard everyone in this congregation as our equal, instead of giving in to what a professor of mine in seminary called "the sin of 'better than-ness,'" and we should give up whatever need we have for power or control for "our way or the highway."

Why? Because that's the example Jesus gave us. Listen closely to verses 5-7: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," Paul writes, "who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself," (In Second Corinthians it says "he became poor so that we might become rich), "taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." This is one of the most fascinating passages in all of Scripture, and it's one of my personal favorites. Here Paul speaks about how God divests Godself of power in Christ to become one with us in the world.

There is no top-down relationship here. No looking up. Instead, as Kelly Fryer, a Lutheran author, puts it, "God always comes down. God meets us where we are. God gives Godself up for our sake. God empties Godself, God becomes poor. God sacrifices Godself so that we might be one with God, and God might be one with us."

This incredible passage is not even the work of Paul. You'll notice in your bulletin that the formatting changes when you get to verse 6. That's because Paul is quoting what most scholars believe to be a hymn of the first generation of Christian believers. So, this is actually what believers were taught and practiced as they sang in house churches across the Mediterranean world. By giving up authority, Jesus here gains a new kind of authority, a kind that conquers hearts through love, instead of other people through force or manipulation, a kind of soft power, if you will, made perfect, as the Apostle Paul says in Second Corinthians, in and through weakness.

There is no talk of *any* such God in *any* of the other world religions of which I am aware. God may appear to be human in some of these other religions. But God empties Godself to become human, fully, totally and completely in the Christian religion alone.

Our Hymn of the Day by Susan Rio captures this paradox, that is the paradox of gaining power after giving up power, the upside-down type of power, beautifully. "Holy God," she writes, "holy and glorious, You come as one among us, you bend to us in weakness," she writes. "Empty," drawing on the language of our Second Reading, "you draw near, and we behold your power."

Notice her language: "tyrants bend others to their will." God in Christ, however, does the opposite. He bends *to us* in weakness, such that God above us becomes and remains God *with* us in life and history.

There's a theologian of the 19th century, Horace Bushnell, who talks about how "there is a cross in the heart of God forever." Our Hymn of the Day, accordingly, uses the present tense when speaking of God's humbling in Christ: it's ongoing. It wasn't once upon a time, or merely for a season, as our Gathering Hymn put it, it's *all* the time.

Whenever we humble ourselves before one another, whenever we resist the need to control others through force or manipulation, whenever we reject the desire to bend them to our will or think only of ourselves, whenever we respect each other and treat each other with dignity, we not only do as Christ did: we anticipate the coming of God's Kingdom he proclaimed in this little community of faith we call Queen Anne Lutheran Church. God's ways are not our ways.

While Joel Osteen, "America's favorite preacher," tells us to "stop looking at our weaknesses and start declaring our strengths," the Apostle Paul suggests otherwise. "And God said to me," he writes, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made

perfect in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell within me.”

*That's* the Christian teaching. Not that we go to Heaven after we die, but that we await the coming Kingdom of God, the very Kingdom for which we pray every Sunday at the end of the Lord's Prayer. That Kingdom will consist of a transformation, not only of society, but of the entire cosmos, according to the Apostle Paul.

We *prefigure* that transformation when we treat each other with respect, when we humble ourselves the way God in Christ humbled Godself for us.

“Will you inherit, or enter, the Kingdom of God?” I'd love to see *that* on a billboard. Not the question we're used to asking, is it? Yet it's the question Jesus asks of us. That's because he, like Paul, understood salvation in *horizontal* rather than vertical terms. The Kingdom, society and Cosmos transformed begins with us, as evident in the way we treat one another in our community of faith. It culminates in the full and total realization of God's upside-down Kingdom at the end of history.

May we lean into that kingdom by humbling ourselves before others, by giving up the need to always be right, by treating others, especially those less fortunate, with kindness and hospitality instead of judgment and disdain. In so doing, may we offer the world a glimpse of the coming Kingdom of God, and may we enter that Kingdom in the life of the world to come.

And all God's people said, “Amen.”