

## What Kind of Kingdom Does Jesus Reveal?

Luke 4, Acts 1

The Bible begins with a picture of a perfect relationship—with God, with each other, in a beautiful place.

The Bible ends with a picture of God’s new community—glorious, full of light and color, beautiful trees and a shining river flowing from the throne of God, and a whole city living in perfect relationships in the light of Christ.

Both pictures portray the kinds of things we’ve always wanted—to be loved, cared for, intimate with God, surrounded by happy friends, with endless opportunity to be creative and fruitful and energized and affirmed. But we don’t see that kingdom clearly yet.

In between those pictures we see a fallen creation full of broken relationships. And the bulk of the Bible is about God’s way of restoring that which has fallen short of his glory.

So what is God’s way? How does God get His Kingdom to come in this fallen world? He is still building His Kingdom, but He has a very strange way of doing it—not at some nice, comfortable place, but on the road; not with a strategic team of experts, but with one man and woman who in their old age still have no children.

Eventually they do have descendants, but they spend a painfully long time in slavery. When He rescues them from slavery, they complain about the way He leads them. When He leads them to a promised land they refuse to go in. When they do go in they quickly lose interest in Him and worship idols.

Eventually He shows up among them in the flesh. He talks a lot about His Kingdom, but He gathers only a few authentic followers. Even they abandon Him when His enemies seize Him and kill Him. But within days He is alive again. And instead of punishing those who denied and abandoned Him, He calls them again and reviews this whole Kingdom plan once more. Then He leaves them with no visible city, no evident Kingdom.

He leaves them in a world where straightforward power seems to get almost everything done, from conquering nations to grinding grain. Take charge, make things happen, assert your will, never give in, flex your muscle, prove who is strongest, king of the hill, beat them into submission, raise the trophy with your strong Right-arm-kind of power—that is what we know. Let’s call that Right-handed power.

**Right-handed power** seems the obvious way to build anything. But it has two serious limitations:

- 1) **It cannot force anything living to grow;**
- 2) **It cannot nurture loving relationships.**

If one of the vital goals of life is to grow in loving relationships, right-handed power will fail miserably. To accomplish that goal, you not only have to refuse to use Right-handed power, you may also be devalued and even opposed.

To accomplish Jesus’ life-giving kind of goals, requires something different, something Martin Luther called **Left-handed power**. (It’s a figurative term; don’t take it literally. I got it from **Robert Capon in his book “Kingdom, Grace, Judgment,” Eerdmans Publishing, 2002**. Much thanks to this author for articulating it so well. Capon credits Luther, but I have not found it in Luther’s works so far.)

Left-handed power is counter-intuitive, more open, more patient, more gentle. In this world it looks at first glance more like weakness than strength, more like passivity than action, more like losing than winning.

What's more, if we chose to apply Left-handed power rather than Right-handed power, we will, at first, question whether we have accomplished anything at all. But if Jesus is our leader, we find ourselves involved in a different kind of Kingdom—the kind that Jesus always talked about and most people rejected.

A lot of people followed Jesus while they still thought He was a miracle-working fix-it man with great potential for Right-handed conquest. Most abandoned Him when He showed His true Left-handed colors by dying, rising and disappearing.

Saving the world by miracles is something we can see and understand. Saving it by dying and growing the fruit of the Spirit—that is a whole new realm we have to develop eyes to see and ears to hear, or we miss it altogether.

Once, for example, Jesus ministers to a huge crowd that wants to for Him to be their Right-handed king. When the disciples are flushed with excitement about this apparent success, Jesus sends them across the Sea of Galilee in a boat while He goes off alone to the hills for a very Left-handed activity called praying.

Two New Testament events bracket Jesus' teaching on this Left-handed Kingdom: At the beginning of His public ministry Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tested. At the end of His public ministry He ascended out of sight. Both of these events emphasize the kind of Kingdom Jesus is building.

#### **The Kingdom in the Testing of Jesus (Luke 4)**

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry” (verse 1, all quotes NIV).

**The Spirit of God was present (not absent) in the testing.** It's a mistake to assume that trials indicate the absence of God. God does the unexpected. God uses everything.

**Jesus was tempted with the same things we are.** I think we could confess that the devil's ideas seem to have appeal. Who wouldn't turn stone to bread? Who wouldn't like to be king of the world? Who wouldn't jump off a cliff in front of your neighbors if you knew angels would give you a great ride?

(verse 3) “Turn this stone to bread.” Use your Right-handed power to take care of yourself and avoid the more challenging work of trusting the Lord. (Missionaries call that “discovering support.”)

(verse 7) “Worship me and it will all be yours.” Avoid the Lord's Left-handed way of humility, and bow to my Right-handed way of domination. The Lord's way is tedious and painful. My way is the ladder to worldly success.

(verse 9) “Throw yourself down from here.” Look to the Lord to supply power to show off, to look successful, to be a winner.

Every response Jesus gives is a quote from **Deuteronomy**. What was going on when those Scriptures were written first in Exodus? The people were rebelling against God leading them in the wilderness. They appealed to Egypt. It has big buildings. It has lots of money. It has a well-equipped army. We don't even have a regular place to camp. Obviously Egypt is successful and we are not.

They pointed at the Canaanites. They're big. They're powerful. Their cities are like fortresses. You should see their gardens.

God said: (in Deuteronomy 4) Don't worship idols; (chapter 6) Love the Lord with all your heart, soul and strength. Worship and serve Him only; (chapter 8) Don't test the Lord by demanding He play by your rules.

Why did He lead you into the wilderness? To teach you that the most essential thing to your life is not the bread that you digest in your stomachs; it is the truth spoken by the Lord that you must digest in your heart.

Jesus is saying, "You conceive of a Messiah who does tricks and overwhelms people with his Right-handed power. The world already has that kind of leadership, with disastrous results. You don't get God's Kingdom that way.

**Jesus gets what we all want, but not in our way.** Instead of a miracle snack for Himself, Jesus turned five loaves and two fish into a meal for 5,000. He said that He is the Bread of Life. And when many people realized He was making the spiritual as important as the material, they left Him.

Instead of having angels rescue Him, He went ahead and died. Then He rose again and ascended to the Father where He reigns in glory.

Instead of the devil's way to world domination, He takes the way of the cross and ends up having the Father exalt Him and give Him the name above all names so that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord.

If we read the end of the book we can see what Jesus ends up with, and it's far better than what Satan proposed. You'll also notice that those who enjoy it with Him are those who suffered the way of Left-handed power instead of imposing the beastly Right-handed power on others.

**At the other end of Jesus incarnation, Acts 1** says that after His resurrection He appeared many times over 40 days and "spoke about the Kingdom of God" (verse 3).

**The disciples were slow to grasp the Kingdom even in Acts.**

(verse 6) "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Translation: "Now, do we finally get the restoration of an earthly, military, political king again? Will Israel be independent and prominent? Do we get to flex our power?"

I find it encouraging that the disciples, who had followed Jesus in the flesh for three years, were slow to appreciate Jesus' kind of Kingdom. It shouldn't trouble me too much that I am slow and my friends are slow to grasp it.

(Verses 4-5) “Don’t leave Jerusalem. Just wait, and in a few days you will receive the Holy Spirit.” Jesus didn’t say, “Now that you understand the Kingdom you will receive the Spirit.” Because they didn’t understand the Kingdom.

Jesus was saying, “You won’t grasp my kind of Kingdom until you receive my Spirit.” Before the Spirit came, they still expected a Right-handed kingdom. After the Spirit came, in **Acts 2**, they went out and started ministering in distinctly Left-handed ways:

They crossed cultural barriers, instead of hating their enemies.

They spoke in simple humility.

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to sharing meals and to praying.

They were generous and selfless, and people were drawn to them.

We all get discouraged when we feel invisible or under-supported, or when we fear about the future. But the Lord drew me to people who are ministering to internationals because it looks a lot more like Jesus’ kind of Kingdom than most of what I had seen in western ministry.

It’s not an either-or. We need other ministries. We need churches. But the very things that can seem discouraging to us may be things that Jesus transforms from shame to honor and from humility to glory. We’re in good company.

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(I was assigned this topic for a retreat of my colleagues. To fit purpose and time parameters, I condensed this from a longer sermon I had written on Luke 4 in 2004.)