

What the Kingdom of God Has to Do with Holiness

Author: Paul F. Evans

The New Testament views the reality of the kingdom of God as breaking in on this present age, with saving and reconciling power, restoring all things to God, bringing them under the sovereign authority of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Colossians 1:13–23). Mark first spoke of this in his gospel, declaring that with the coming of Christ the kingdom of God was no longer just near in time, but close spatially because the King was now among them (Mark 1:14–15). “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand,” he boldly asserted (Mark 1:15a, ESV). Luke’s gospel account similarly asserts that with the coming of Christ, and the outpouring of the Spirit, the kingdom of God is breaking into this present age. By creating a Spirit-filled community in which Christ reigns as head of his church in anticipation of the fullness of his rule over all creation in the age to come, the Lord has initiated his Kingdom among his redeemed people here and now (Romans 8:18–25; Ephesians 1:22; 5:23; Colossians 1:18).

But what is the dynamic of the Kingdom’s arrival in this present age? What brings it into conflict or confrontation with the spirit of this age (2 Corinthians 4:1–4; Ephesians 2:2)? In a word, *holiness*.

Paul’s basic theology of *sanctification* notes that holiness is initiated at salvation through a transformational union with Christ (Romans 5:1–21; 6:1–10). Believers are called on to make a categorical surrender of their will to God (6:11; 8:1–4). After which, there is to be a persistent ongoing surrender to the leading of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who will produce righteousness (right conduct) in the saints (6:12–23; 8:1–4; Galatians 5:16–26), and who by engaging them in the process of conscientious obedience to God, will develop mature Christian character (Galatians 5:16–26), until Christ is formed in them (Romans 8:5–17, 29–30; Ephesians 4:13–16, 22–24, cf. 1 John 3:1–3). Paul assumes by calling on his readers to surrender to the Spirit, and to walk in step with him (Galatians 5:16–17, 25), there is a very real sense in which his Galatian converts are able and free to do so (5:1), and to reject the proposal of the Judaizers, to seek *righteousness* through application of the law (5:2–4). He also assumes that they are free from, and are capable of rejecting any temptation to return to principles and elements of this present age that once dominated them before they came to know Christ (1:6; 3:4:3–4, cf. Ephesians 2:1–3). The present age has lost its power and grip on their lives, and the indwelling Spirit is now at work in them to bring about the righteousness of God (cf. Ephesians 2:4–10).

With this in mind, Galatians 5:13 begins with an appeal to the freedom Paul’s readers have in Christ: “For you were called to freedom, brothers [and sisters].” Paul’s premise is that it is through the Spirit that God will finally produce righteousness in those whom he has justified (5:5). They have been set free from sin, bondage to sin’s domination, and from slavery to the fundamental principles of this present age, the elements of our world that are opposed to the rule of God (4:3–4; 8–11). Final and fully mature righteousness in the saints (cf. Romans 8:28–30), which will be revealed in the age to come, will be realized through the Spirit in those who have been relocated into Christ (Galatians 5:5, cf. Romans 5:1–2; 6:3–10), and who therefore have entered into the kingdom of God (cf. Philippians 3:20). This is what we hope for, and what Paul strives for in Philippians 3:7–14. However, even *now* holiness is being developed and facilitated in the lives of the disciples of Christ through the operation of the Spirit in this present, transitional age, as a characteristic manifestation of the kingdom of God, to which they now belong (2:14–16; 4:17–21; cf. Matthew 5:13–16).

By Paul's reckoning, the kingdom of God is breaking in on this present age, as predicted in the Old Testament, to be modeled in blamelessness and righteousness before a crooked and unbelieving generation, in which they shine like stars in the sky (Philippians 2:14–16). But this sanctified witness from the church to this present age is principally brought about through the operation of the Spirit in the lives of those who surrender to Christ (Galatians 5:16–25). This maturing Christian character affected by the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit and right conduct in the lives of those who belong to Christ, while at the same time it brings to prominence, in full view of the children of this age, the true righteous character of God and his kingdom.

To be united with Christ, by grace through faith and repentance, is to be brought into the kingdom of God, as it works its way into this present age like salt, like light, or like yeast in a lump of dough (Matthew 5:13–16; 13:33; 1 Corinthians 5:7). In this way, the kingdom of God confronts and challenges the present age through the transformed lives of God people, who are empowered by the indwelling presence of God's Spirit among them, and in them. And one of the more obvious characteristics of this transforming power, the evidence of the Spirit's presence among God's people, is *holiness*—life transforming and conduct altering righteousness, working its way through every aspect of their lives and relationships. Holiness is the nature and character of the Kingdom on display in this present age. It challenges the sin and evil that grips much of the world. It offers relief and freedom through a risen Christ, to those who are dying in their sins, and the real assurance that God will lift the penalty of his judgment from all who will repent and turn to him.