

Entering the Kingdom

FOUR

CHOOSE TO LIVE

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.

2 Samuel 7:12-16

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W*hat did they know and when did they know it?* When U.S. congressional committees convene to probe into supposed violations or inquire about questionable actions they invariably ask, “What did they know and when did they know it?” At times managers in corporations must deal with those same questions when something goes wrong in an area for which they are responsible. Whenever children seem to be involved in some dubious activity, responsible parents will want an answer to the same question.

When John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2) and Jesus (Matt. 4:17) announced to the nation Israel, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” their declaration posed serious questions to the thoughtful Jew. Put yourself in the place of those in the first century. Would they comprehend the reality and magnitude of the message? Would they clearly comprehend their role in the coming kingdom? If not now, when?

Kingdom of Heaven¹

Major Issue #4

Entering the Kingdom:

Entering eternal life
(salvation)

or

Inheriting the kingdom
(rewards)

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To understand the kingdom of heaven and the impact of the announcement, this phrase must be seen in its historical context.

The Context

God selected Abraham to be the father of a specific nation, Israel, through which God would reveal Himself in a unique way to the rest of the world. After Abraham was declared righteous by faith (Gen. 15:6-21), God obligated Himself to Abraham through an eternal covenant, incorporating the prior promises recorded in Genesis 12:1-3: a *land*, a *seed*, and a *blessing*. An expanded development of the *seed* portion of the Abrahamic Covenant was given to David (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 89:3-4). The Davidic Covenant describes a ruling family, a house; a sphere of rule, a kingdom; and a seat of government, a throne...It is in this historical setting of the covenant promise that the Gospels unveil the coming of the promised King and His offer of the promised kingdom to God's chosen people, the physical descendants of Abraham in potential fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant (Luke 1:30-33). The rebellious, covenant nation of Israel is being called back to God in preparation for the establishment of the kingdom.²

Jewish Expectation

“In the Old Testament the believer looked forward to the future reign of Messiah.”³ Indeed “the prophets had much to say about Messiah’s future reign (cf. Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-16; 25:1–27:13).”⁴ The national expectation was for only one coming of the Messiah and when He arrived He first would deliver the nation from Roman oppression and then immediately setup the promised earthly kingdom from which He would reign forever.⁵ “For the Jews there were but two ages, the present age and the ‘age to come’ — which was Messiah’s reign on earth.”⁶

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Kingdom Entrance

The anticipation of the Messiah was keenly present in the first century. With John's announcement of the King's presence, would the nation now prepare itself for the reality of the promised kingdom?⁷ Would the King be embraced and His eternal reign on earth begin? What would qualify someone to enter the kingdom?

Knowing what was required was critical. Undoubtedly some Jews assumed their Jewish heritage alone, as God's covenant nation, would grant them automatic entrance. To gain a better perspective of what was necessary for admission, we should consider the use of the phrase, "enter the kingdom," throughout the Gospels.

Entering the Kingdom through Faith!

The chart, *Entering the Kingdom* (see page 62), reveals the majority of times this phrase is found in the Gospels, with the use of "life" indicated and the context provided. This should readily provide the answer to what it takes to enter the kingdom.⁸ Note the three times the rich young ruler (RYR) is specifically indicated by the lower-shaded areas. Also notice that in the last two rich-ruler texts children are included (Mark 10:13-16 and Luke 18:15-17). Not hindering children from coming to Him is likened to *entering* the kingdom. As in the Mark and Luke texts, the third rich-ruler passage also addressed children (Matt. 19:13-15), but that text did not incorporate the phrase "enter the kingdom" and therefore is not included on the chart. Nevertheless in each case the children's way of entering the kingdom is almost universally understood to be God's gift of life through childlike trust.

*God's life-gift
through faith
results in entry
into the kingdom.*

Included in each of the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' interaction with

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<u>Book</u>	<u>Ch</u>	<u>Vs</u>	<u>Enter Kingdom</u>	<u>Eternal Life</u>	<u>Life</u>	<u>Context</u>
Matt.	5	20	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			<i>Sermon</i>
	7	21	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			
	18	3	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			<i>Children</i>
	18	8			<i>(enter) life</i>	
	18	9			<i>(enter) life</i>	
	19	16		<i>(obtain) eternal life</i>		
	19	17			<i>(enter) life</i>	<i>RYR*</i>
	19	23	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			
	19	24	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			<i>Disciples</i>
	19	29		<i>(inherit) eternal life</i>		
Mark	9	43			<i>(enter) life</i>	
	9	45			<i>(enter) life</i>	
	9	47	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			
	10	15	<i>enter it (kingdom)</i>			<i>Children</i>
	10	17		<i>(inherit) eternal life</i>		<i>RYR*</i>
	10	23	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			
	10	24	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			<i>Disciples</i>
	10	25	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			
	10	30		<i>(receive) eternal life</i>		
Luke	10	25		<i>(inherit) eternal life</i>		<i>Lawyer</i>
	10	28			<i>(will) live</i>	
	18	17	<i>enter it (kingdom)</i>			<i>Children</i>
	18	18		<i>(inherit) eternal life</i>		<i>RYR*</i>
	18	24	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			
	18	25	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			<i>Disciples</i>
	18	30		<i>(receive) eternal life</i>		
John	3	5	<i>enter the kingdom</i>			<i>Nicodemus</i>
	3	16		<i>(have) eternal life</i>		

* Rich Young Ruler

the rich ruler was introduced with teaching on childlike trust. It is logical to assume a connection between the two. If so, nine of the fourteen occurrences of “entering the kingdom” shown on the chart illustrate that God’s life-gift through faith results in entry into the

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kingdom. In fact, using Matthew 19 to illustrate, the construction of these three passages connects the progression: from, *first*, Jesus teaching His disciples about entering the kingdom through childlike faith in God (vv. 13-15), to *second*, Jesus' interaction with the rich ruler (vv. 16-22), to *third*, Jesus teaching His disciples why a rich man will not enter the kingdom without trust in God alone (vv. 23-26). Using these teachable moments, Jesus clarified for His disciples that access to the kingdom is exclusively through faith in God.

In each context except for those pertaining to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:20 and 7:21) “eternal life,” “enter life,” or “will live” are used in reference to “entering the kingdom.” “Life” that is everlasting and “entering the kingdom” obviously relate to one another in each passage. It can certainly be said that the phrases “enter life” and “enter the kingdom” are equivalent expressions in both Matthew 18:3-9 and Mark 9:43-47. In each passage Jesus uses a hyperbolic expression to convey a spiritual principle through exaggeration.⁹ He illustrated the seriousness of erecting stumbling blocks to truth especially when it involved children. The gravity of His words is referenced in the chart below.

MATTHEW 18 AND MARK 9 PARALLELS		
<u>Remove</u>	<u>Matthew 18</u>	<u>Mark 9</u>
Hand	Enter Life (v. 8)	Enter Life (v. 43)
Foot	Enter Life (v. 8)	Enter Life (v. 45)
Eye	Enter Life (v. 9)	Enter Kingdom (v. 47)

Since the contrast in these two passages is between eternal life and eternal separation from God (see Matt. 18: 8, 9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47), it must be concluded that entering eternal life is synonymous with entering the kingdom. This is what Jesus told Nicodemus. Being born again, receiving God's gift of eternal life, places one in

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the kingdom (John 3:5, 8, 16). Entrance into the kingdom is based on God's life-gift through faith alone and nothing else.

Entering the Kingdom by Works?

However, the Sermon-on-the-Mount texts (see Matt. 5:20 and 7:21 in the chart on page 62) do not equate "entering the kingdom" with "eternal life."¹⁰ "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that of* the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). As a result, some often state that entrance into the kingdom is based on a believer's good works, a prize earned through obedience.¹¹ The basis of this line of reasoning is the use of "righteousness" in Matthew 5:20 and believers being the exclusive audience to which the Sermon was addressed.

These viewpoints, however, are unfounded. *First*, does "righteousness" in this text refer to positional righteousness or practical righteousness? If the former, one's standing before God is the issue.¹² If the latter, obedience to God's commands is the concern. Other than Matthew 5:20 and 7:21, every instance on the *Entering the Kingdom* chart would support a "positional" righteousness point of view and that evidence alone carries considerable weight. On the other hand, those who hold that Matthew 5:20 is addressing "practical" righteousness state that we should not impose Paul's view of imputed or positional righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21) when Jesus' point was obedience in the believer's walk. One proponent says,

The Pauline doctrine of imputed righteousness...is not even discussed in the entire book of Matthew. The righteousness referred to in the Gospel of Matthew is practical; it describes what a person actually does in the responses that he makes toward God....The condition for entrance into the kingdom, then, is a practical "righteousness [that] surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees."¹³

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However, when James, Jesus' half-brother, wrote his very early letter to the predominately Jewish church, he went all the way back to Abraham in Genesis 15:6 to discuss "positional" righteousness, referring to Abraham's right standing with God when the Abrahamic Covenant was given. James also addressed the "practical" righteousness of Abraham when he offered up his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Jam. 2:21-24). Abraham was declared to have a righteous standing before God, *as a result of faith and as a result of works*.¹⁴ Not only is faith-righteousness or positional-righteousness presented, but also works-righteousness or practical-righteousness is presented in James's letter. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount addressed both types of righteousness, while Matthew 5:20 in particular concerned positional righteousness.

Faith-righteousness, not works-righteousness, imparts entrance into the kingdom. Righteousness evidenced by works is the basis for rewards and for reigning in the kingdom by those who have already entered through faith alone.

Second, was the Sermon on the Mount given exclusively to believers? The controversy is whether only the "disciples" (Matt. 5:1-2) are directly addressed or if Jesus' teachings were also directed to the "multitudes" (7:28-29). As the Sermon concludes, we are informed that the multitudes had been listening intently

to Jesus (vv. 28-29). They were "amazed at His teaching" and realized He had been "teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." Obviously the multitudes had continued to follow Christ and His disciples and heard His teaching.

Persuaded that believers were the exclusive audience, an author writes, "The Sermon on the Mount is not about salvation, since it

*James taught
both "positional"
and "practical"
righteousness
(Jam. 2:21-24).*

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was not given to the lost. It was spoken for the saved to instruct them about how to enter into the coming kingdom of Christ.”¹⁵ Not only did this author conclude that believers were Jesus’ exclusive audience, but in so doing he also espouses the view that entering the kingdom is based on the believer’s good works.

Jesus spoke to mixed audiences on many occasions for different reasons, often soliciting different responses. Supporting this idea, Zane Hodges writes,

The Sermon on the Mount had a double audience. On the one hand it was ostensibly preached to Jesus’ disciples who were gathered before Him (Matt 5:1). Technically, Jesus was instructing them (5:2). From their perspective, the Sermon on the Mount can be understood as laying down the standards of conduct appropriate to a disciple of Jesus as he lives in anticipation of the coming kingdom....But the Sermon had another audience as well. This was composed of the multitudes who followed our Lord (Matt. 4:25; 5:1). And Jesus never forgets their presence, even while He is prescribing a code of behavior for His own disciples. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount can be seen as a masterful interweaving of Christian ethics with pre-evangelistic activity.¹⁶

Nevertheless, even if the Sermon was limited to the disciples, Jesus’ use of His “righteousness” instructions could be identical to James’ use of “righteousness.” Writing exclusively to believing Jews (Jam. 1:1, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10; 4:11; 5:12, 19), James taught of both “positional” and “practical” righteousness (Jam. 2:21-24), emphasizing the relationship between the two, with actions being based on the believer’s standing with God.¹⁷

This position that requires works to enter the kingdom is based solely on a believer-only audience. It fails to align with overwhelming scriptural support for entry only by God’s life-gift through faith.

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Making the Pieces Fit

God's life-gift through faith is the means of entrance into the very presence of God.¹⁸ Were these not Christ's words to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43)? Why did Jesus not tell the thief, "I will see you in the kingdom?" The answer: since "Jesus and the earthly kingdom, which He had come to inaugurate, were rejected by the nation, in particular by the religious leaders, the offer was withdrawn and the kingdom was postponed."¹⁹ As a result, the earthly kingdom continues to be a future expectation, waiting for the second coming of Christ.

First-century Jews saw only one future and eternal reign of Messiah. Those at that time who trusted in Christ embraced the eternal reality of the coming kingdom. Many others continued to look for another king: one having regal charisma, unquestionable authority, and ultimate power to usher in the fulfillment of all God's covenant promises. Nevertheless those who trusted in Jesus received God's life-gift, guaranteeing them entrance into the future earthly kingdom (both millennial and eternal) as well as being ushered into God's presence at death if the kingdom did not appear in their lifetime.

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Chapter 4, NOTES

1. While heaven is the source of the kingdom, the kingdom is not heaven. As a result the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are interchangeable concepts. The kingdom of heaven typically is associated with the eternal kingdom or new earth where believers will spend eternity in God's presence following the recreation of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21-22).
2. Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2010), 185-86.
3. Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 372.
4. *Ibid.*, 372-73.
5. Kenneth Barker, private conversation, on April 29, 2011 regarding the Jewish expectation concerning the kingdom.
6. Enn, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 372.

As with all prophecy we see glimpses of the whole. Seeing only the mountaintops of prophetic expectations, we miss the valleys in between until additional progressive revelation is provided. A case in point is the thousand-year earthly reign of Christ preceding the eternal kingdom revealed to John at the end of the first century and recorded in Revelation 20. There are two major and diametrically opposing positions concerning Revelation 20 and the thousand-year reign of Christ. One, the millennial view sees the 1,000-year kingdom prior to the eternal kingdom. The other, the amillennial position has no 1,000-year kingdom period.

Amillennial Position

The traditional *amillennial position* sees the church as spiritual Israel, eliminating the need for a future thousand-year (millennial) kingdom for national Israel with Christ reigning from Jerusalem. The Abrahamic Covenant is further developed in the Davidic and New covenants. The Davidic Covenant was established with David (2 Sam. 7) and was fulfilled in Christ, the Messiah and Abraham's seed. The messianic reign was instituted with Christ's ascension to the Father (Acts 1). When Jesus returns, the eternal state will follow judgment. Presently we are in the "between time" with Christ reigning from heaven (Ken Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment* [St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2011], 117).

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Millennial Position

The traditional *millennial position* understands the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants as perpetual and unconditional promises of God to the nation Israel. The church does not supplant Israel. Rather God temporarily set aside the nation Israel because of their rejection of the Messiah. While God’s current form of the kingdom on earth is the church, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, He will again restore the nation Israel in a future earthly, millennial kingdom following Christ’s return and before the eternal state (Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment*, 118).

This book holds the view that the millennial position provides a better interpretation of the Scriptural teachings of a literal, earthly reign of Christ and better accounts for the Revelation 20 evidence of a 1,000-year kingdom prior to the eternal kingdom, which involves the recreation of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21-22).

From the amillennial perspective, there are only two ages, the present age and the future age, the eternal state or kingdom (see below). On the other hand, the millennial perspective sees three ages: the present age, a millennial kingdom, and an eternal kingdom (see below). However, the millennial kingdom and eternal kingdom are best understood as two phases of the future event. From this perspective, the millennial and the eternal phase are essentially viewed together. “The millennial aspect of the kingdom merges into the eternal kingdom” (Kenneth L. Barker, “The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and The Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 303). Seen from either point of view, the first-century Jew could envision only one future, the eternal reign of the Messiah. This would have been the mindset when the promised King and kingdom were announced.

MILLENNIAL AND AMILLENNIAL COMPARISON			
Amillennial	Present Age	Eternal Kingdom	
Millennial	Present Age	Millennial Kingdom	Eternal Kingdom
	<i>Present</i>		<i>Future</i>

7. National repentance was a prerequisite for the establishment of the kingdom. There is not enough room in this book to discuss the repentance requirement. However, repentance is thoroughly discussed by this author (*Hold Fast*, 185-93).

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8. The chart, *Entering the Kingdom* (see page 62), addresses fourteen of the eighteen occurrences in the Gospels where the phrase “enter the kingdom” is used. Additional occurrences are found in Matthew 21:31; 23:13; and Luke 16:16; 23:42. These instances do not alter the argument made in this book.
9. Hal M. Haller, Jr., “Matthew,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin, (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 1:82-83.
10. Thomas L. Constable, *Bible Study Notes on Matthew* (www.soniclight.com, 2010), 68-72.

Constable provides an excellent presentation of the six major ways to interpret the Sermon on the Mount: soteriological, sociological, penitential, ecclesiastical, millennial, and interim interpretations. This author agrees with the interim approach: “The sermon is primarily addressed to disciples exhorting them to a righteous life in view of the coming kingdom” (Constable, 71).

11. This position comes from two different perspectives. *First* are those who distinguish salvation from discipleship. This view is represented by Gary Whipple and Curtis Tucker. *Second* are those who merge salvation and discipleship. This view is represented by John MacArthur and James Boice.

Distinguishing salvation from discipleship:

“It [Matthew’s gospel] does not emphasize the *gift* of salvation, which allows one to enter ‘heaven;’ but the *prize* of salvation, which allows one to enter the ‘kingdom of heaven’” (Gary T. Whipple, *The Matthew Mysteries* [Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1994], 1).

“For years I have seen lives changed when people grasp the clear distinction between heaven and the kingdom of Messiah. One is a *gift* and the other a *prize*. One must be received by faith alone, while the other, the prize, is earned through faithful obedience to God” (Curtis H. Tucker, *Majestic Destiny* [Redmond, OR: Last Chapter, 2011], preface 2, italics added).

These authors tell us that the kingdom of God does not relate to heaven or eternal life (Whipple, *The Matthew Mysteries*, 112). In fact we are told that we must “maintain the biblical distinction between heaven and the kingdom of heaven and between the different conditions for gaining entrance into them” (Tucker, *Majestic Destiny*, 122). While heaven is equated with the gift of salvation, the kingdom of heaven is synonymous with the future earthly millennial kingdom of Christ following His return and is entered by faithful obedience (Whipple, *The Matthew Mysteries*, 112).

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In an effort to distinguish and contrast initial salvation from discipleship, these authors make an erroneous distinction between entrance into salvation or eternal life and entrance into the kingdom (the millennial kingdom).

Merging salvation and discipleship:

John MacArthur writes, “Those who teach that obedience and submission are extraneous to saving faith are forced to make a firm but unbiblical distinction between salvation and discipleship....The call to Calvary... is... a call to discipleship....To respond to that call is to become a believer. Anything less is simply unbelief” [John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 29-30]. For James Boice separating salvation from discipleship is a “defective theology” [James Montgomery Boice, *Christ’s Call to Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1986), 14]. Boice writes, “Discipleship is not a supposed second step in Christianity, as if one first becomes a believer in Jesus and then, if he chooses, a disciple. From the beginning, discipleship is involved in what it means to be a Christian” (Ibid., 16).

Taking the typical Reformed view, MacArthur and Boice merge salvation and discipleship, requiring works to obtain eternal life and therefore to enter eternal life and the kingdom. As a result, they understand entering the kingdom to be synonymous with inheriting the kingdom. That error is addressed in both chapter 3 and chapter 4. Note that 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; and Ephesians 5:5 concern “inheriting the kingdom,” not “entering the kingdom.” Entering the kingdom is by faith alone, while inheriting the kingdom concerns obedience to God’s Word and rewards.

12. Zane C. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2011), 400-401.

Hodges understands that Matthew 5:20 refers to the perfect righteousness of God.

13. Tucker, *Majestic Destiny*, 146-47.

Agreeing from the Reformed position that “practical righteousness” is the emphasis of Matthew 5:20, John MacArthur says, “Those who think of salvation as merely a legal transaction, a reckoning apart from practical righteousness, will have a difficult time with this warning [found in Matt. 7:21-23] of Jesus. It puts salvation in very practical terms. It reiterates the key statement of the Sermon on the Mount: ‘For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven’” (MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 188). Obviously, works are required for the Reformed view to possess saving faith and eternal life.

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14. Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2010), 144-46.
15. Tucker, *Majestic Destiny*, 147.
16. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer*, 400-401.
17. Ken Neff, *Free to Choose* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2011), 81-91.
18. Entrance into “heaven” is not based on faith alone; rather entry is based on God’s life-gift which is appropriated through faith alone, as discussed by Neff, “Myth 5: Faith Causes Salvation,” in *Hold Fast*, 67-75; and by Neff, “Myth 2: Saved and All Is Forgiven,” in *Free to Choose*, 40-42.
19. Neff, *Hold Fast*, 186-87.