

Sermon follow-up
Matthew 11:1-6
The Shape of the Kingdom

I want to focus on the application of the text. I had three lessons I wanted to draw out; I did not get to cover all of them. I'll review the first two here and expand upon the third.

1. What do we learn from John's doubts? The kingdom does not come in order to make us personally comfortable. Indeed, the kingdom might well take away a lot of comforts and securities. How do we square the presence of the kingdom with the suffering of God's people? With tragedies and illnesses? With our countless day to day frustrations? We can always offer biblically grounded speculation about what God is up to. But there will still always be puzzles and mysteries.

In those times, we have to look at the "big picture" in the way Jesus points John to the "big picture." A time is coming when all that is still wrong in the world will be set right. This is why the whole creation rejoices when God comes to judge (cf. Ps. 98). In the meantime, we should not overlook signs of the presence of the kingdom all around us.

Jesus' kingdom may not take the shape we would want. We might be tempted to think "If I were on the throne rather than Jesus, I'd be doing a better job" (see the movie *Brice Almighty* for a good expose of the problem with this kind of thinking). We have to trust that Jesus knows best and that his kingdom is proceeding according to schedule. Even if we are like John languishing in prison, we have to trust that God is acting in love and wisdom for the good of his people (Rom. 8:28).

2. Jesus' use of Scripture reveals his identity. While John and others may have been confused about his identity, Jesus knows exactly who he is and what he's doing. He takes Isaiah's prophecies as his personal agenda; he uses Isaiah's words as a lens through which others can get a glimpse of the true meaning of his ministry. Jesus takes a cluster of prophecies about the Messiah and the Servant and applies them to himself; but more than that, in some cases, he is taking passages that describe what YHWH will do and applying them to himself. Jesus is showing, by way of Scriptural allusion, that he is the personal embodiment of YHWH, he is YHWH in human form. He is bringing life and salvation in a way that only YHWH himself can do; he is doing what the prophecies said YHWH would do when his kingdom arrived in history.

If Jesus has identified himself this way, it would be foolish for us to try to define him in some other way.

But also note what this does to our understanding of God: Just as John tried to fit Jesus in a pre-defined understanding of the kingdom which turned out to be misguided, so some have tried to fit Jesus into a pre-defined view of God. In reality, it must work the other way around. Jesus shows us the essence of the kingdom in word and deed ministry. But he also shows us who God. God wants us to know him through the words and actions of Jesus. As one theologian put it, the Christian confession is not merely that Jesus is God,

but that God is Jesus-like. God is compassionate and tender and merciful in this way. God is reluctant to bring judgment and slow to get angry. God takes us the by the hand and speaks encouraging words. God will not snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed. What other God is like this, humbling himself and giving himself sacrificially for his people? Other gods demand first and only given in return; but our God, revealed in Jesus, gives first.

This bears upon the mission of the church. Just as the ministry of Jesus revealed ‘what God is like’ so too should the ministry of the church. Indeed, all of God’s commands can be understood in the light. God gives us the commands he does not so that we can earn his favor. Nor does he even give them merely for our good, so that we will live as he designed us to live. Rather, God’s commands are given so that, in keeping them, we can show the world his wisdom and love (cf. Deut. 4). This puts an entirely different spin on the “Why be obedient?” question. God wants us to show the world what he’s like and what he has in store for humanity by how we live our lives. What a high calling!

3. The question that was asked of Jesus can be asked of the church: “Are you the people of the Messiah, or should we look for another?” After the death and resurrection of Christ, our gospel words and merciful deeds do not create doubt (as they did for John) but certainty. But have we done the deeds needed to back up our claims?

Jesus inaugurated the kingdom in his life, death, and resurrection. But throughout his ministry, he was showing his disciples the shape of the kingdom. Obviously, Jesus launched the kingdom into the world in a unique and unrepeatable way. But the kingdom pattern of word and deed continues. Jesus planned for his disciples to carry on what he started by ministering in word and deed in the power of his Spirit.

We have to learn to think of Scripture’s ethic not simply as a commands to keep or examples to imitate, but as a symphony to be played, a drama to enact. Jesus calls us to embody the life and pattern of the kingdom.

We need to read from the same sheet of music, the same script, Jesus read from. That is to say, our kingdom ministry should look like his. We should manifest the same pattern of grace in word and deed. We preach the gospel – the royal announcement that the King has arrived, the Jesus is lord. The King has landed; he has taken possession of the kingdom; he has fought off the dragon and rescued his bride.

But the kingdom is not merely a matter of words. It also consists in deeds of kindness, performed in Christ’s name. These deeds of sacrificial love aim at bringing wholeness to others. If such mercy stood at the heart of Jesus’ ministry, it must stand at the heart of the church’s mission as well.

Think about the meaning of Jesus’ miracles. They were not simply magic tricks, of sorts, to show off his divine power. They were not raw demonstrations of his sovereignty. More than anything, his miracles served to reveal the nature of his kingdom. His kingdom comes to redeem, restore, and heal this broken, fallen world from sin and all its

ramifications and consequences. The miracles of the kingdom restore human life to what God intended from the beginning.

That is to say, the miracles of Jesus do not suspend the natural order of things as is sometimes said) but restore it. Jesus' miracles are ways of putting this fallen, disjointed creation back in place. His miracles give previews of resurrection life and glory. We cannot simply turn the miracles into metaphors of spiritual healing or an inner salvation (e.g., Jesus heals us of our spiritual blindness). That is certainly true – but the miracles are mighty works of restoration that takes place in the physical world. They are transformation of the deformed creation. The miracles show us that God's salvation is comprehensive.

The miracles, thus, reveal the true nature of the church's mission. We are now called to do in a more ordinary way what Jesus did an extraordinary way. No, we can't cure blindness with a word or touch. But we can minister to the blind. We serve them and relieve their suffering in at least some small measure, so they get a (fore)taste of God's shalom (peace/resurrection life). We can certainly preach the poor, and give them dignity and purpose, and even help try to escape the dehumanizing, oppressive forces of poverty that make their lives so hard and full of misery. We must take our cue from Jesus' miracles, remembering that Jesus is just as concerned with the body as he is the soul, and just as concerned with society as he is the individual.

Throughout the gospels, the kingdom of God is very much in the foreground. On page after page, the kingdom is mentioned. John announced the coming of the kingdom. Jesus preaches the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus' parables are stories about the kingdom. He talks about entering the kingdom and living within the kingdom.

But in the background stands the OT notion of shalom, or peace. The OT prophets had declared that when God's reign broke into history, shalom would come. And what is that shalom? Its when every piece of God's creation is flourishing, when every entity in the creation is rightly related to every other piece, when everything God made is rightly related to God and everything else God made. Cornelius Plantinga explains:

The prophets knew how many ways human life can go wrong because they knew how many ways human life can go right. (You need the concept of a wall on a plumb to tell when one is off.). These prophets kept dreaming of a time when God would put things right again.

They dreamed of anew age in which human crookedness would be straightened out, rough places made plain. The foolish would be made wise and the wise, humble. They dreamed of a time when the deserts would flower, the mountains would run with wine, weeping would cease and people could go to sleep without weapons on their laps. People would work in peace and work to fruitful effect. Lambs could lie down with lions. All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder; all humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God and delight in God. Shouts of joy and recognition would well up from valleys and seas, from women in streets and from men on ships.

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness and delight* – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

The fall has spoiled *shalom*:

"Evil is what's wrong with the world, and it includes trouble in nature as well as in human nature. It includes disease as well as theft, birth defects as well as character defects. We might define evil as *any spoiling of shalom*, any deviation from the way God wants things to be. Thinking along these lines, we can see that sin is a subset of evil; it's any evil for which somebody is to blame...All sin is evil, but not all evil is sin...all sin is *culpable evil*...Sin grieves God, offends God, betrays God, and not just because God is touchy. God hates sin against himself, against neighbors, against the good creation, because sin breaks the peace...God is for *shalom* and *therefore* against sin."

But now Jesus restores *shalom*:

The whole natural world, in all its glory and pain, needs redemption that will bring *shalom*. The world isn't divided into a sacred realm and a secular realm, with redemptive activity confined to the sacred zone. The whole world belongs to God, the whole world has fallen, and so the whole world needs to be redeemed--every last person, place, organization, and program; all 'rocks and trees and skies and seas'; in fact, "every square inch," as Abraham Kuyper said. The whole creation is a 'theater for the mighty works of God,' first in creation and then in re-creation.

As Nicholas Wolterstorff put it, *shalom* is now both *God's cause* and *our call*. It's is God's promise and our project. He explains:

Can the conclusion be avoided that not only is *shalom* God's cause in the world but that all who believe in Jesus will, along with him, engage in the works of *shalom*? *Shalom* is both God's cause in the world and our human calling. Even though the full incursion of *shalom* into our history will be divine gift and not merely human achievement, even though its episodic incursion into our lives now also has a dimension of divine gift, nonetheless it is *shalom* that we are to work for and struggle for. We are not to stand around, hands folded, waiting for *shalom* to arrive. We are workers in God's cause, his peace-workers. The *missio Dei* is our mission.

In an interview, Wolterstorff explains in more detail

(<http://www.thefigtree.org/Nov04images/Wolterstorff.html>):

"To love one's neighbor is to seek *shalom* (in the Hebrew Scriptures) or *eirene* (in New Testament Greek). That is translated as 'peace,'" he said, preferring to translate it as "flourish."

"To love your neighbor as yourself is to seek to advance your neighbors so they flourish," he said. "The ground floor of *shalom* is justice, but more. In the

Hebrew Scriptures, shalom and justice are integrally related in care for victims of injustice—widows, orphans, alienated, vulnerable and impoverished people.

“Shalom is ‘embodied’ in food, clothes and things that meet needs of our bodies. Shalom is social, too—‘embodied’ in friends, family, community and all creation,” he said.

“Shalom includes delight,” he continued, challenging the view of Aristotle and ancient philosophers that assumed the question was: “How can I live my life well?”

“Some think the only way to live life well is to save souls. Jesus confronts that ancient scheme, telling people to love your neighbor as yourself,” Nick said...

“Most think the Old Testament is about justice and the New Testament, about love. It’s because the New Testament Greek word for justice, *dikaiousune*, is translated in English as righteousness, which is more personal than justice.

So the mission of the church is to further the presence of God’s shalom in the world. God made creation to be a kind of fabric woven together, where every thread goes over, under, around, and through every other thread, in a beautiful, webbed, interwoven whole. The creation was designed to be a tapestry of interdependent relationships, with everything in its rightful, flourishing place. That restoration of that kind of shalom is what the kingdom is all about (which is why the kingdom must culminate with a bodily resurrection and completely renovated physical creation). In short, shalom is *the way things really ought to be*.

The church now carries forward Jesus’ mission of shalom. We advance the kingdom by reweaving the frayed tapestry of broken lives. And just as it was for Jesus, our “calling card” is to be mercy. In a fallen world, mercy is what lifts people out of their misery and restores them to shalom. Mercy is what reconnects people with their Creator and with the creation. Mercy puts people in a right relationship with God and the rest of the creation.

The cutting edge of the church’s work in the world is not judgment. It’s not condemning this or that group, or blaming these or those people for what is wrong. Obviously, that’s not to say the church never prophetically critiques the world or passes judgment on the sins of the world. But the church should be better known by what she is *for* than what she is *against*. And she is *for* shalom. That’s where the accent should be.

Now what might this look like? How do we fit into this? The world notes our lack of deeds and (in a John the Baptist way) doubts that the church is really God’s new humanity, the beach head of the new creation. We need to ask ourselves: What kind of mercy and justice must we demonstrate to show that the world that we are who we say we are? It is not enough to proclaim that salvation is found in Christ alone; we also have to show forth this truth by our deeds. The works of Jesus revealed God’s love and God’s plan for his creation. We are called to do works in Jesus’ name that accomplish the same purpose.

Every person's life tells a story. The life of Jesus told the story of self-sacrifice and self-giving love. Our lives are to tell that same story. Consider how this can happen in three areas:

- Relationships—We need to ask ourselves what kingdom relationships look like. Do we use relationships to serve our own ends? Do we choose friends who will make us feel better about ourselves? Or do we see relationships as an opportunity to serve others, especially those with significant needs? We are called to entwine our lives with others, to get tangled up in one another's lives, to get the threads of our lives interwoven with the threads of others' lives, even reaching outside our 'relational comfort zones' to befriend the friendless and difficult. But many of us settle for pursuing relationships that aim at nothing more than self-affirmation. (We don't outgrow that kind of thing when we leave junior high; we just get more sophisticated about it.) If we truly understand the shape of Christ's kingdom, we will not simply use others as a way of getting self-affirmation; rather we will seek out those who need affirmation and try to provide it. We know we have been freely and graciously loved, so we will seek to freely and graciously love others. We will seek to bless and enrich others instead of simply using relationships for what we can get out of them. We will make our friendships and fellowship times serve the common good of God's kingdom; rather than living selfishly, we will make ourselves available to others as Jesus did.
- The poor—Jesus especially targeted his ministry to the poor. That compassion emerges as one of the marks of his messianic identity in Matthew 11. The same quality and intensity of compassion must mark his followers. Indeed, there are more Scripture passages explicitly addressing the poor than almost any other topic; if you were out all these verses into one book, it would be about the size of the epistle to the Romans. One example is found in Isaiah 58. This passage addresses a situation in which the nation of Israel is acting in a personally moral way. Further, they have worship basically right. To the naked eye, Israel is 'righteous.' And yet there is a problem. God is not answering their prayers, and indeed scolds them. They wonder why God is displeased, but the answer is forthcoming. The problem is that they have not cared for the poor and outcast. This is crucial. AT TPC, we obviously emphasize personal piety. We also emphasize liturgy. We know we were made "liturgical beings" (homo adorans), created to worship God. We know that in a very real sense everything flows from that. But Isaiah 58 shows us that unless our personal holiness and liturgical worship are wedded to a care for the poor, it is worthless in God's eyes. We have to have a deep concern for the oppressed and downtrodden; we have to help them not only manage their poverty, but escape it. We have to meet needs with deeds. We have to build networks and webs or relationships that can give marginalized people the encouragement, support, and accountability they need to fulfill God's intentions for their lives.
- Work—Salvation is not by our works, but salvation includes our work. That is to say, our work is saved. It simply has to be this way: Your work is very much a part of you, so if God saves you (in some form or fashion) he must save what you produce (cf. Rev 14). Many Christians have a tendency to think of salvation in terms of God saving souls. But while salvation is never less than that, it is always

much, much more. All legitimate work has its place in God's kingdom because it serves the good of others and because it will be woven into the final form on the new creation in some mysterious way. Our work does not make the new creation, as if it were our achievement – and yet our work is vital to the coming of the new creation (cf. Isa. 60; Rev. 21-22). After Jesus returns, there will be no more need for evangelism, but there will still be a need for plumbers, architects, artists, writers, etc. in the glorified culture of the new heavens and new earth. Thus, the kingdom is not just about “getting people saved” – it's about service to neighbor and doing our work with excellence, in a way that benefits the common good. This is what the shalom of the kingdom is all about. We should not the kingdom is so ‘spiritual’ that it has nothing to do with earthly culture; rather the kingdom is simply earthly culture remade and transfigured by the Spirit! Business, art, education, science, gardening, and every other facet of life will ultimately make its way into God's kingdom; these are the gifts the various cultures of the world (in all their stunning variety) will offer God at the last day. But further, as N. T. Wright has pointed out, this eschatology of work/culture means that we must understand that things done for God's glory and our neighbor's good in the present are actually demonstrations of the coming kingdom in the present. They are like movie trailers – previews of ‘coming attractions.’ Our lives are to give others a preview of the life and culture of the kingdom that will finally be unveiled in all its fullness at Christ's return. By our work – including both vocational work done with excellence and the ‘good works’ of loving others – we give people a sneak preview, or foreshadowing of what God has in store for us. Jesus calls us to act ‘miraculously’ – to reach into the future and a foretaste of it into the present.

In all these ways (and many, many more!) God calls us to be harbingers of shalom. We are called to participate in the kingdom Jesus is building by reflecting his love and peace into the world. The church exists for one reason: to be the answer to Jesus' prayer, ‘Thy kingdom come!’ Jesus said we are seek his kingdom first – that is, we are to make it our highest priority. And Jesus showed us what this means. He sought first the kingdom in his words, deeds, and ultimately in his sacrificial death. Now we are called to participate in his renewal of all things. Allan Wakabayashi puts it well in closing:

God is out the affect everything! He really is out to change the entire world! Jesus came on the scene to announce God's work of restoration over all of his creation. To be faithful to the gospel, we must play our part in the restoration of all of God's creation. Look up! Look around! God is moving to change everything. He is out to change you, inside and out. He is out to change your school. He is out to change your place of employment. He is out to change your community and nation. He is out to change the world!...our mission as Christians is to see God's will, his kingly reign, happen in and around us wherever that is possible. It's not just about saving souls but about seeing the poor are fed and the oppressed freed. It's about caring for the orphans and providing good education for our children. It's about challenging ideologies that counter biblical truth. It's about effecting change in public policy and creating social systems that are more in line with

God's intentions for his world. It's about seeing his reign fleshed out wherever we set foot in our world.

That is to say: the kingdom is about salvation, a salvation that touches everything. God has saved us in order to make us his instruments and agents of salvation in the world.