



**Series Theme:** Looking at the Familiar through Fresh Eyes

**Title:** One Saying – Two Interpretations

**Date delivered:** July 28, 2019

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**Synopsis:** There are two interpretations that come from the phrase “within you.” While usually seen as incompatible, there may be a way to combine the two. The Kingdom of God was within and among those gathered to hear Jesus because Jesus was in their midst – Jesus, the personification of God’s Kingdom. It can also be argued that God placed the Kingdom within each of us as a gift to be unwrapped by us and used to grow in faith and service to God. These two interpretations are both valid in this verse.

**THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON:** Romans 14:13-19 (NLT)

**THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON:** Luke 17:20-21 (NLT)

**MEMORY VERSE: “Lead me in the right path, O Lord.”** Psalm 5:8a (NLT)

**Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.**

Our focus today is just two verses – and of those only one in particular. But that one sentence or phrase has created several thoughts – at least for me.

The phrase: For the kingdom of God is within you. Let’s look at the first potential issue – is it Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven? Have you ever wondered about that? There are several scholars who find that these two phrases have somewhat different meanings; however, the most convincing solution is that, of the synoptic gospels, only Matthew uses the term Kingdom of Heaven and he uses it 32 times. But both Mark and Luke use Kingdom of God in similar passages so it can be said that there is no real difference between these two phrases. This conclusion can be supported when we can look at two parallel passages.

For example, Matthew 4:17 reads: **“Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent of your sins and turn to God for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.’”** Yet in Mark 1:15 Jesus says, **“The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the ‘Good News!’”** These sound like two accounts of either the same or similar occasions.

So I think the reasonable conclusion is that the two phrases are simply two different ways to indicate the same thing: a kingdom or system of government that is ruled by God. This power and authority to rule has been given to Jesus Christ by the Father, who is in Heaven. After Jesus’ death and resurrection he returned to Heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father. At some future time Jesus will come a second time and bring this Heavenly rule to earth. In this way the power and authority behind the reign of Christ can be said to be both “of God” and “of Heaven.”

So that may quiet some of the questions about the first part of the verse – Kingdom of God vs. Kingdom of Heaven, but what comes next is not so easily solved. Here in Luke, Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” Yet there are other translations that state that the Kingdom of God is “among you” or “is within your midst” or “is within your grasp” or “will suddenly appear among you.” Why all the different versions?

I found this quite interesting so I hope you are willing to journey with me. The two most common translations are – “is within you” and “is among you.” And in this phrase it does make a difference. Apparently in the original Greek (and I can’t verify this since what Greek I learned in seminary has now been largely forgotten) but in the Greek the word is “within”

you. So it would seem that there would be no controversy as to how this sentence should read – “within you” would be the exact translation of the Greek.

However, there is a theological problem with this. Jesus was talking to a number of Pharisees, men who were working to try to discredit Jesus, get rid of Jesus, even going so far as to plot how to kill Jesus. Theologians argue that these men could not have the Kingdom of God within them; rather they were evil, followers of Satan and not followers of God. There could be no Kingdom of God within them. So there needed to be a finer lens placed on the study of this one word.

Theologians suggested an alternative. The Kingdom of God was not within those Pharisees but rather it was within those who had gathered around Jesus to listen to him. Not within the people gathered but within the gathering itself. In other words, the Kingdom of God was within the gathering – that Kingdom of God was personified in Jesus. Jesus came in human form to live among us, to experience all the things human beings can experience, even death. Therefore, this makes good theological sense – the Kingdom of God could not be in the Pharisees but could be personified in Jesus’ coming among us. It had to be all about Jesus and not about the Pharisees or even us.

This distinction has been given great importance by theologians who are using it to support or tear down certain overviews of Christianity – things like the various forms of millennialism as well as dispensationalism – discussions about end times that are interesting but take time to understand the various fine points. Personally, and this may be a failing on my part, I don’t worry much about the end times. I know Jesus Christ will come again and that God will be in control whether I have the right definitions for how that may take place. I would rather focus on the work of the church in the here and now rather than worry about the future.

I would like to offer another alternative – that I believe would allow both of these perspectives to work together. This is not a concept I have read about in preparing for this sermon. Instead it came as a result of thinking about these two ways of interpreting this one little word. To begin, I have a problem with theologians dismissing what the Greek word means. Their rationale for this is that the Pharisees could not have the Kingdom of God within them because they are sinners – and not just any sinners – sinners who were in total opposition to Jesus and his teachings. A result of this reasoning is that people who are not believers, believers without question, believers who always do the right thing, if they are not like that then they cannot experience the Kingdom of God here on earth and likely not even in Heaven. That would mean that no one who has ever questioned godly

authority could experience the joy of living in God’s care while here on earth. I do not believe that God works that way. People come to faith in a whole variety of ways by a whole variety of paths, at different times of their lives.

To experience the Kingdom of Heaven within is another way of saying that the Holy Spirit dwells within us. We all have experienced what it feels like inside when we have done something that is pleasing to God – and when we do the opposite. When the Kingdom of God is within us, we can communicate with God through the Holy Spirit in a way that is more intimate than even the communication between long-married husbands and wives or even between twins. Often they are seen as knowing one another so well that they can read one another’s minds. And if not totally able to read each other’s minds, they are most capable of reading facial expressions and can tell whether their spouse or twin is happy, sad, tired, angry, or scared. Humans can make more than 20 different facial expressions, and those who know a person well can understand where they are emotionally, just by reading the expressions on their faces.

How much more can we know, read, the emotional expressions of God through the Holy Spirit residing within us – there is no need to look at another, just to look inward and allow communication to begin. And God dwelling within us knows us more personally than we even know ourselves.

So I do have a bit of a problem with the idea that those who are sinners, and that really is all of us, cannot have the Kingdom of God within us – because we are sinners. Whether the sins are big or little, they are still sins, and to say that this excludes an intimate relationship with God’s Kingdom does not seem to me to be what Jesus has promised.

I am comfortable with thinking of the Kingdom of God coming among us through Jesus. A perfect Jesus is the perfect example of becoming a member of God’s Kingdom. But I also feel that this is not completely accurate. If we take this scripture to mean that God’s Kingdom can be within all of us, then that Kingdom would be among those gathered, not just in Jesus. Those who were listening to Jesus, those who were thirsting for such Good News, those who were skeptics, and those who outright denied this truth were all there – and I think that the Kingdom of God was with them as well – not in the full and complete way that the Kingdom of God was with Jesus, but there in some way with all who had gathered nevertheless.

An image that comes to mind is that of the God-shaped space in all of us. I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that everyone needs God in their lives, in their hearts. If we want to call this need a God-shaped space, I think that makes sense. That space can’t be filled with other

things – money, power, cars, houses, jobs, prestige. Only God can fill that God-shaped space. One way to think of this space is as a gift from God. When we were created, God placed that God-shaped space within us – as a gift, a gift waiting to be unwrapped and used. When a person becomes a believer, it’s like this God-shaped space, a gift from God begins to be unwrapped, and the person can experience the joy that comes from having a relationship with God dwelling within.

Again, I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to think of this God-shaped space is filled and waiting to be unwrapped. If a person never becomes a believer, that gift is never unwrapped and the person is never aware that such a gift is waiting there within them. Not all people unwrap this gift. So while the Kingdom of God can be thought of as a part of human DNA, it is not activated until it is recognized and unwrapped by its owner. To me this interpretation puts the other interpretations together to make a logical whole.

I recently read a story from the childhood memories of a man known to many of us who have experienced the adult Sunday school class in recent years. The man’s name is Dallas Willard. He died in 2013 after a long and distinguished career as a philosopher, theologian, writer and teacher, a man who could teach us much. Here’s his story in his words:

As a child I lived in an area of southern Missouri where electricity was available only in the form of lightning. We had more of that than we could use. But in my senior year of high school, the REA (Rural Electrification Administration) extended its lines into the area where we lived, and electrical power became available to households and farms.

When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life — daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it — could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity — and take the practical steps involved in relying on it.

You may think the comparison rather crude, and in some respects it is. But it will help us to understand Jesus’ basic message about the kingdom of heaven if we pause to reflect on those farmers who, in effect, heard the message “Repent, for electricity is at hand.” Repent, or turn from their kerosene lamps and lanterns, their iceboxes and cellars, their scrub-boards and rug beaters, their woman-powered sewing machines and their radios with dry-cell batteries.

The power that could make their lives far better was right there near them where, by

making relatively simple arrangements, they could utilize it. Strangely, a few did not accept it. They did not enter the kingdom of electricity. Some just didn't want to change. Others could not afford it, or so they thought.

To be sure, that kingdom has been here as long as we humans have been here, and longer. But it has been available to us through simple confidence in Jesus.

We all, not just we gathered here this morning, but we all humans, can unwrap that God-shaped space within us and hook up to the power of the Holy Spirit, the power that comes from God's dwelling within us and among us. That idea is truly electrifying. Let us pray.

Holy and powerful God, we thank You for gifting us in so many ways. You have given us talents to share, time to help others, and treasure to give to others. You desire a close relationship with each of us, closer and more intimate than the tie between long-married husbands and wives or even twins. You dwell in us, helping us to make right decisions and convicting us when we do not. We would be lost without You. Thank You for walking with us on our earthly journeys. In Your Son's name we pray. Amen.