

WHY STAND YE GAZING
UP INTO HEAVEN [WHEN]
THE KINGDOM OF GOD
IS WITHIN YOU?

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In giving my remarks a title, I have quite promiscuously mixed two statements from the New Testament that come from different speakers, at different times, addressing different audiences for different reasons. I even supplied my own subordinating conjunction, “when,” to link the two statements together. Normally I am against this kind of nonsense, which is how people draw all sorts of unwarranted conclusions from scriptural texts. In this case, though, I am convinced that the two statements come from an understanding of the gospel that the speakers share but that most followers of Christ overlook. So I begin with the question: Why stand ye gazing up into heaven when the kingdom of God is within you?

The first part of the question comes from the opening chapter of the Book of Acts. The resurrected Jesus Christ has been teaching his disciples for “about 40 days,” and his time on earth has come to an end. His disciples ask one last question, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

Jesus politely, but firmly, tells them that they are missing the point. And then, “when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9).

And this is where the story really starts, because this is where the church really starts—with the confused disciples staring up at the sky and wondering when Jesus was going to come back and create the kingdom he had spent most of his ministry talking about:

¹⁰ And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;


¹¹ Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. (Acts 1:10–11)

This question the men in white apparel ask strongly implies a follow-up statement that is not a question: “that is not where you are going to find what you are really looking for.” This follow-up makes no sense if the disciples are really looking for Jesus, since the beings acknowledge that when Jesus does return, he will come from exactly the place that they are looking. But we already know that the disciples are looking for something else. They want to know about the kingdom of God, which they have always believed would consist of a divinely restored version of the united monarchy of David and Solomon.

The key to the New Testament, I believe, is understanding that, and how, they were wrong.

To read the New Testament is to become obsessed with what Jesus, in all four gospels, calls the “kingdom of God.” One gospel writer, Matthew, also calls it the “kingdom of Heaven,” using a Jewish convention of not naming God too frequently to avoid vain repetition. In the New Testament, the “kingdom of God,” the “kingdom of Heaven,” just the “kingdom,” and just “Heaven” all refer to the same thing. It is the main thing that Jesus talks about and the concept that most of his parables attempt to define.

But where is this kingdom? The book of Acts is quite clear that we won't find it by looking up. And fortunately, Jesus told us exactly where we can find it. He does so in the seventeenth chapter of Luke, immediately after Jesus heals ten lepers and only one, a Samaritan, returns to say thank you. The Pharisees who witnessed the miracles, perhaps sensing that they were the basis of a Messianic claim, "demanded" to know when the kingdom of God would come. Christ replies: "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20–21).

This is the second half of the question—a statement of so much importance that it should be printed in capital letters, an extra-bold font, and an old-fashioned text manicule saying  **THIS IS THE POINT**. Heaven is not a place in the sky, nor is it something that happens after the world ends, or even when Christ comes again. The kingdom of God is within us. Like a tiny seed, and it can take root and grow, or wither and die, depending on what we do to nurture its potential.

A corollary to this is that the teachings of Christ—what we frequently call "the commandments"—are not requirements that stipulate how we can earn a reward in heaven. They are instructions about how we can build the kingdom of heaven. They are consequential rather than transactional commandments.

I want to focus on the difference between these two concepts, because we often get them wrong. I learned this many years ago when, shortly after our son's baptism, I told our five-year-old daughter and some of her friends in the car that they needed to stop fighting or there would be consequences. My daughter shrieked: "Noooooo. I'm too young for consequences. I'm only five, and I don't get consequences until I am eight."

I realized then that I had been using "consequences" to mean "punishment," and I had to explain that I had been wrong. A punishment

is what you get if you do something that I tell you not to do. A consequence is something that follows naturally from your actions in a way that neither you nor I—nor even God—can prevent.

A transactional view of Christ's commandments frames righteousness and obedience as rational consumer choices that we make to purchase celestial goods and services. Avoiding X cups of coffee and paying Y dollars of tithing gets us to Z level of eternal glory.

A consequential view of commandments, on the other hand, sees certain actions as leading to certain consequences by the very nature of the actions themselves.

For example, in July, I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. My doctor told me that it was imperative for me to lose weight because my life literally depended on it. So I searched around and found a diet that I thought might work. It's called the "eat less and exercise more" diet. I gave it a try and, I have successfully lost some, but not all, of the weight that was threatening to shorten my life.

I do not believe that I was blessed by God for my obedience in following the two great commandments of weight loss—eat less and exercise more. I don't believe that, in sacrificing carbohydrates upon the altar, I showed my worthiness to be thin. There was no transactional sense in which I followed a diet and exercise regimes. The things I did produced the consequences I desired. Because that is how consequences work.

The more I have read the New Testament, the more I have become convinced that most, if not all, of the things we call "commandments" are, in fact, simple statements of natural consequences. If we do X, the natural consequence will be Y. God does not tell us what do so much as he tells us what certain things mean. If we treat others as we want to be treated, we do not "go to heaven." People doing unto others as they would do unto themselves is what being in heaven MEANS.

Let's explore this line of reasoning with an example from Christ's ministry. One passage that I have always struggled with is the story of

the rich young man in Matthew 19 who asks Jesus what he should do to have eternal life:

¹⁶ And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?

¹⁷ And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.

¹⁸ He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness,

¹⁹ Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

²⁰ The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?

²¹ Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

²² But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (Luke 17: 16–22)

Most traditional readings of this passage are transactional. The rich young man went away sad because Jesus gave him a requirement that he was not willing to meet. He would not be able to go to heaven and have eternal life because he was not able to pay the price demanded by the transaction. I always thought this was unfair. It seemed like the young man was being punished for trying to do better. If he had just stopped before asking “what lack I yet?” he would have been fine.

If we read the same passage consequentially, however, it takes on a new set of meanings. Perhaps the young ruler cannot inherit the kingdom of God until he gives up everything else because giving up everything that is not the kingdom of God is what “inheriting the kingdom of God” means. And Jesus was not offering him a deal; he was providing him with a blueprint.

We find a lot of support for this view in Christ's parables. The kingdom of God is the most common subject of the parables, many of which begin with the phrase "the kingdom of God is like. . . ." As it turns out, the kingdom of God is like a great many things. Like a mustard seed, it begins as something small and grows to immense size; like leaven, it exists among other things but changes their natures; like a fishing net, it will draw in many that have to be sorted out and thrown back. Like workers in a wheat field, we have the responsibility to gather the all people into the kingdom; God, not us, will separate the wheat from the tares.

One of the most constant messages of these parables is that the kingdom can only be inherited by people when they understand that it is more valuable than any other thing they could possibly possess. Like the pearl of great price, its value is incomparable, and like the field with the treasure, anyone who knows the secret of its value will be willing to give up everything to get it.

All of this speaks not to obedience and rewards but to actions and consequences. Wanting to give up everything to build the kingdom of God follows naturally from an understanding of what the kingdom of God is. And only people who understand this will be able to build the kingdom of God.

Which brings us to the two great commandments that Christ gives in Luke 10: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:27). When his interlocutor asks, "who is my neighbor," Jesus obligingly gives the parable of the good Samaritan to make it clear that the answer is "everybody."

It seems to me that, much like "eat less and exercise more," the commandments to "love God and love everybody else" are not transactional and regulatory but consequential and constitutive. Loving God and loving people are not things we have to do to "get to heaven." They are, rather, the rules that constitute heaven in much the same way that four sides of equal length constitute a square.

If a shape is constituted by three, or five, or eight sides, or by four sides of unequal length, then it is not a square. This is not a moral judgment, just a simple application of a definition. In precisely the same way, if we are not in a place where everyone loves God with all their heart, or do not love their neighbors as themselves, then we are not in heaven. We are somewhere else.

By definition, the kingdom of God is a place where people treat each other as the Samaritan treated the traveler. And where being a Samaritan is not a problem because people love without boundaries and care for each other without conditions. This could be our home, our neighborhood, our ward, or our nation. But we can only have what the kingdom of God is by being willing to give up everything that it is not.

And here's the kicker. If we are standing around with confused looks on our faces, gazing into heaven, and wondering when Jesus is going to come down and make things the way that they should be, then we are missing the point. That is not where the kingdom is going to come from. It will come from me, and from you, when we truly experience conversion—when we understand that we can have what we want the most, so we must to pay very close attention to what we really want the most.

The kingdom of God is within us, but some assembly is required.

And I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, whose kingdom we have all been enjoined to create, Amen.

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ARTISTS

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