



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Is Jesus Your King?”

Matthew 7:7-8:13

Welcome to this last Sunday in the cycle of seasons we call The Church Year. Every Church Liturgical Year—with Scriptures assigned to each Sunday—begins anew on the first Sunday of Advent—next week, December 2. We tell “the Jesus story” using mainly one of the gospel records that year, running from Advent through Pentecost. Most of the rest of the year not part of a “season” like “Advent” is called, “Ordinary Time”—not a gripping category, but there you have it. This last Sunday of the Church Year is called, “Christ the King Sunday”. And that’s why we’re asking today, “Is Jesus Your King?”

Open your Bibles with me to Matthew’s gospel, chapter 7, beginning in verse 7. I’m going to read a significant section that ends Jesus’ teaching in his “Sermon on the Mount”, and moves immediately to give us Jesus in a different role—the role of healer. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

The major subject of Jesus’ teaching—here in this formal collection of material, and in teaching moments throughout his ministry—is “The Kingdom of Heaven (or, the Kingdom of God)”. “Ask, seek, knock”, he says. Come to God for the Holy Spirit, for the gifts you need to live in Kingdom Life today. God wants to include all who want to be included. His message of the Kingdom is no secret, just for a few. It’s for everyone.

Jesus ends his “Sermon on the Mount” as Matthew has it with a series of comparisons: wise and foolish builders, narrow and wide gates, true and false prophets. With these word pictures, he warns us to pay attention to what he’s been telling us about his major subject: how to live when God rules finally and fully. He warns us against being sure of our salvation by our own judgment.

I’ve seen a bumper sticker that says, “If you think there is no God, you’d better be right!” Jesus says here, “If you think you are saved, you’d better be right!”

As Jesus concludes, there at the end of chapter seven, “the crowd is wowed”, because he taught “as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law”. Without having examples of the teaching of their regular teachers to compare with Jesus, it’s hard for us to really understand their remark. Surely, this Jesus from Nazareth must have been a charismatic man; he attracted people easily, and fit in everywhere. But what the crowd has noticed, in addition, is that Jesus does not cite earlier rabbis’ interpretations when he gives the meaning of parts of the old Jewish law. He just tells people what God wants by these commandments and statutes—straight out, without referring to other men. He had his own authority that came from a source the crowds recognized as deeper and more powerful than what they had been getting from their regular teachers.

And as if to prove the crowd right, Matthew gives us accounts of some of Jesus' healing miracles. It's as if Matthew was saying to the crowd, "You are right. This Jesus DOES have authority. See?!"

And there's a theme of "authority" in those miracles as well, isn't there? Coming down the mountain, a leper confronts him, and confesses his trust that Jesus can heal him, if he wants to. "You bet I do," says Jesus. "Be cleaned of your leprosy." Bang! It's done! That's power! But notice: next, Jesus does a very orthodox thing: he tells this healed man to show himself to the priest, as the Jewish Law required. One of the priest's duties was to act as a public health officer, and to diagnose whether a person had leprosy and therefore had to be removed from the village. Should the leprosy be cured, the priest served again as the gateway to return to normal village life. Jesus supports this. No, Jesus does not want to use his authority to do away with the whole of the Law of Moses. He just wants to make it serve its intended purpose: to create and maintain a people who demonstrate covenant faithfulness to God.

"Authority" is a big theme in the next miracle, where the Centurion—a Roman sub-commander—asks Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus is willing—"Shall I come and heal him?" Isn't that interesting? Jesus is willing to serve, even a Centurion of the hated Roman army. He's willing to travel, in order to do it, and go to the man's house—which was forbidden. Jews were not supposed to go into the house of Gentiles—let alone a member of the army that was oppressing the people. Jesus once again makes himself a servant. His authority is in support of those in need.

This Roman knows a lot about whom he is dealing with. He recognizes Jesus' authority—perhaps he has just seen the leper made whole. So he says, "just say the word", and my servant will be healed. Now Jesus is amazed at how this Roman "gets him", when the people who should "get him" can't see God among them. Jesus has authority among those who recognize that authority.

That's God's way. God does not force his authority upon people, like people tend to do. God puts into our hands how we will respond to him. Will we respond to his authority by making him OUR LORD, which we do by becoming his servants, every day, every moment? Jesus said, "by their fruits you will know them". By our fruits—by what we do with our time, talent and treasure—we show that we are his servants. Or, not.

OK, let's see what we can make of all this.

Have you ever had someone come up to you and challenge you, "Excuse me, Ma'am. Are you saved?" Lots of Christians fumble around for an answer. Depending on our makeup, we want to assure ourselves and our questioner that we are OK with God, but we don't want to make too much of our part in that. So we may talk about the time we confessed our sins by saying to God, "I'm sorry." We tell our questioner that we asked God to "Please" forgive us. And since Jesus promised to be with us always, we say "Thank You"—for coming to live in me in the form of the Holy Spirit. Sorry, Please, Thank You. If you haven't done that, you are not yet on the journey with Jesus. You're still running your own life, and the warnings of Jesus are for you.

But I want to ask a question of the questioner. "Isn't, 'Are you saved?' the wrong question?" For such a question, there are only two possible answers—"yes", or "no"—OK, there's another option, the "I don't know" answer. But hidden in that question there is an assumption that salvation is a matter of a single decision, an act of contrition and dedication.

That salvation can be “a done deal”. This is what I call “the mistake of salvation by transaction”. As you’ve heard me say time and time again, “It’s not a transaction, it’s a relationship.”

The men on Friday have been walking with Abraham in early Genesis, as he has been invited into a covenant relationship with God. God has given the covenant—stipulating the relationship to which God is committing himself to, with Abraham. It’s a startling thing for the culture of that time, the very idea that God would commit to a clan, and hold to faithful behavior—even if the other party might be unfaithful. That’s the difference between a “contract”, and a “covenant”. If someone breaks a contract, the faithful contract partner is freed of obligation. But in a covenant, the covenant parties commit to unconditional faithfulness. Do you understand the difference? God calls us to a new covenant with him, in Jesus.

Many have missed this “ongoing” nature of covenant life, life in God’s Kingdom. As Jesus warns us, it’s not what we do (even miracles and healings in his Name); it’s knowing Jesus that makes the difference. Do any of us want to hear from Jesus’ lips, “I never knew you”? Don’t we long to hear, instead, “Well done, good and faithful servant?” Such a servant KNOWS what his master wants because he KNOWS his master. A Christian is a follower of Jesus, not a believer in Jesus. She walks and talks with him, as “In the Garden” sings. He receives power to notice God at work, and join in. She receives authority of Jesus to heal and lead others to salvation in the covenant relationship we live out with the rest of God’s people. The faithful servant, the wise builder, the narrow way, all connect with Jesus more and more each day. A day without Jesus, without God, is a day wasted, with regret. A day lived in Jesus, for Jesus, with Jesus is a day to celebrate, whatever the outcomes. Why? Because for a follower of Jesus, Jesus is the King. He is Lord. I’ve given him the right to interrupt my life for His purposes, the right to change my plans, because I trust that he will give me more in “His kind of life” than I could ever find on my own.

You see, there’s another difference between a contract and a covenant. In a contract, both parties participate in creating and negotiating the terms of the contract. The contract is between parties who—for the purposes of the contract terms—are equal. But a covenant is created by a Lord and presented to the servant. The parties are not equal. The servant takes it or leaves it—and then has to go on their own, doing without the sponsorship and protection and the deep friendship of the Lord.

When we are children, we tend to pick up a picture of God as “out there, somewhere”, and God is REALLY BIG. We’re kind of glad, if we think about it, that God IS “out there, somewhere”. What would we do if God showed “right here, right now?” Like everyone in the Bible, we would tremble in fear.

With this idea in our heads and hearts, we miss the point of Jesus, of the incarnation. With Jesus, God comes to us. We don’t have to fear God, as if we were going to get a beating. Jesus comes to us to invite us to follow. Following Jesus is an ongoing process, a “walking with God” that continues. Salvation is a process. Paul put it this way: “¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12-13, NIV)

Salvation is walking with Jesus, listening to the Lord, watching for what God is doing, and rolling up our sleeves, or sitting down to listen to a hurting person.

When you hear the question about Jesus as your King, is he a distant King who has written a command letter (the Bible)? Or, is he a King who comes to you, to invite you to follow where he leads—on Sunday, on Monday, on Tuesday...?

The Bible is God's Word; it reveals to us God's character as shown in history. If the Holy Spirit is in us as we read, the Bible gives us clues about where to look for God now—by what we see God values, what moves God's heart.

It may be a simple matter of applying what we read about God back then, and doing that now. That can be a challenge, of course, but it's also fairly safe; we can point to “verse a in chapter b”, and say “that's what I'm doing to be faithful to my King.”

But we may find God is calling us to a new, risky application of God's values. We know that, because God is talking to us now—through the Scripture, or through a nudge about a situation right in front of us that is not a simple, literal application of “verse a in chapter b”. Our confidence about taking risks like that grows because we have come to know by experience the One who is the Author of the Scriptures. We see God doing that, and in the sense of His presence, we join in. That's “the cutting edge of The Kingdom”, that takes more ground from the enemy, that joins in God's redeeming work. This is the King we know. This is the King who gives us His friendship, as we step UP to what He is doing.

Is Jesus your King? What kind of King is he? Is he a distant deity that you expect to meet only at the end of your life? Or is he near--as close as your breath which He gave you, certainly within eyesight (for those with eyes to see and ears to hear)?

Is Jesus Your King? Not just “King” by law, but King of your heart? Come to Jesus. Continue to walk with him in Kingdom living. Hear his voice. Watch for what he is doing. Read his Word. Be still, and KNOW that he IS God, the Lord. Say and live—Jesus is MY Master, my King.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on November 25, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]