

# What Does God's Realm Look Like?

Sermon by Joseph Easley 8-11-19 @ Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Last Sunday I raised what I think is the most basic questions of faith: “What is your image of God? I asked that because how we see God is important. Some versions of “God” are truly scary. A “God” you don’t feel you can trust is not a “God” you can have faith in.

Some popular visions of God are more like Zeus, the chief God of the Greeks. (I mistakenly said “of the Romans” in last Sunday’s sermon; Jupiter was the Roman counterpart of Zeus.) In Latin the word for God is “Deus”, which is spelled the same as “Zeus”, except you change the first letter from “Z” to “D”. Some of “Zeus” carried over to “God” in Roman culture & ultimately into the Western Church with its headquarters in Rome & Latin as its language.

But Christian faith says Jesus is the incarnation of God—and the Son of the Father, so “God” is actually like Jesus. There’s a family resemblance! The qualities we see in Jesus are God’s qualities. The writer of 1<sup>st</sup> John says best what God is like: “*God is Love.*” The God-Who-Is-Love created the universe because of love, continues to hold that universe and every one of its creatures in love, came to our world in Jesus and abides with us in the Holy Spirit. That is a God I can believe in, whom we can trust, in whom we can have faith.

Then, our question as Christians is how do we live **in light of** God Who Is Love? Perhaps another way to phrase this is: “What would it be like to live in a world where God’s intent is realized?”

Frankly, I would like to live in that world! I am a little frustrated with the world we seem to have right now. More than a little frustrated! I am deeply saddened! What about you?

I will confess the middle of last week I was in the deepest funk I have experienced in years! I heard about the El Paso shootings last Saturday afternoon, and the ones in the Dayton about 6:30 Sunday morning, but both times I was concentrated on preaching here Sunday morning.

The rest of Sunday I rested a bit but keep busy the remaining time with household chores, etc. Monday Patti and I drove to Indy for 2-hour

meeting and back. That evening we had dinner with friends. Tuesday I had 3 important meetings, from 7:30 AM to 7:00 PM, 2 of which I led and for which I had extensive preparation. Wednesday I drove to Corydon, IN for lunch with a fellow pastor and friend who is on the other side of issues that currently divide the United Methodist Church. We had scheduled this 6 weeks earlier to listen to each other, to seek to understand the other's position & share our hope for the church.

When I got home that afternoon and had a chance to rest, it seemed like the news I had heard during the week began to sink in, along with all the back & forth about it, and different accusations of what caused it & what to do about it. I went to bed feeling depressed and alone, but unlike most times, I woke up Thursday feeling even more down & helpless about our world. Half the day I really just wanted to cry—very rare for me. I spent a lot of the day reading the laments of Jeremiah and the Psalms, in which people of faith poured out their grief and complaint to God about the state of their world.

I think taking that time was helpful, because by Friday morning some insights had come along with ideas for things I might do to try to address some this in my own small way. I felt a surge of energy and worked all morning and most of the afternoon on the computer writing in response to this and tending to some other things I needed to do.

Frankly, there are still a lot of things heavy on my heart—and suspect I am not alone in those feeling. I long for a world that is different—one that is more kind, compassionate and just. I want *“Peace on earth, good will to men”*—and women! I long for a world that operates like I think God want it to. You might call that “the Kingdom of God”.

In fact, that is the phrase Jesus spoke of most frequently in the first three Gospels. With that Jesus has my attention, even more so that usual. After his baptism and temptation, the first chapter of Mark says: *“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news.’”*

“The Kingdom of God” is spoken of 50 times in the first three Gospels. An addition 31 times Matthew speaks of “the Kingdom of Heaven”—that is his preferred term, following Jewish custom to avoid saying the name of

God and instead referring to God indirectly via God's realm. So over 80 times in the Gospels the Kingdom of God (or heaven) is named.

We tend to think of the kingdom of God or heaven as coming after death, but Jesus taught God's realm is "at hand" and available now. In fact Luke 17:20-21 says: *"Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will you say "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For in fact the kingdom of God is among you.'*"—Another possible translation of that would be, "the kingdom...is within you."

Most of us would like to live in a world where God's way is reality: Where the values of God are practiced, and those values are supreme. "What does God's realm look like?" The corollary to that is: "How do we get to live there?"

Jesus shows us what it looks like & how to live our lives now in that "Kingdom." He shows this especially in 3 ways:

**First**, Jesus demonstrates the realm of God in his actions. He spent time with people—individually, whenever he was sought out or he reached out to someone; at weddings; at dinners with a variety of characters; frequently talking & praying with the Twelve; and with crowds, who came out to hear him. He spent time with all the right people, but also with all the wrong people—tax collectors, prostitutes & sinners. He always seemed to have time for people. He was present to their joys and sorrows. He entered into their suffering.

He went even further than that: He attended to their needs. This is another way in which he demonstrated the kingdom of God. He healed people of their diseases and infirmities. He casted out the demons that seem to possess people, which today we might call mental illness, addiction, or dysfunctional relationships. He continually showed us the kingdom in his compassion & care for people.

If this is how Jesus modeled God's kingdom, it seems to be our model too.

**Second**, Jesus also demonstrated the realm of God in parables he told—many of which began with, "The Kingdom of God is like..." He said it is

*“like a mustard seed...the smallest of seeds...that grows into a great shrub.”*  
*“...Like yeast that a woman...mixed in with 3 measures of flour until all of it was leavened”*—and presumably the bread rose. *“...Like treasure hidden in a field...”* and *the finder went and bought the field.* *“...Like a merchant in search of fine pearls...”* who sold all that he had to buy one pearl of great value.

Even when he didn't use the term, you have to think a lot of other parables demonstrated the ways of the kingdom or realm of God, including: a shepherd who left the 99 and searched for the 1 lost sheep, a father who received back his prodigal son with rejoicing, and a good Samaritan who showed love for his neighbor on the road. Each of these parables carried some kind of surprise: Something that went against conventional wisdom to show a different value set or show action that indicated all-out commitment to what was of greatest worth.

If these tell us of God's realm, it seems we enter that by adopting these same values and committing ourselves to the things of greatest worth

**Third**, it seems the values of God are found in Jesus' teachings that sound like the opposite that we hear in the media and in advertisements.

In fact, perhaps the best picture of God realm is in the Beatitudes. They begin what is called Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." This is the first of five extended teaching sessions by Jesus in Matthew. These first 10 verses seem to set the stage for all the rest of the Sermon—and in fact, for the remainder of Jesus teaching.

Bible students since the earlier centuries of the church have seen these as Jesus' answer to the Ten Commandments. Jesus doesn't throw out the commandments—They set necessary boundaries—but he shares something even greater in these: **the keys to God's kingdom.**

Notice: These are not commandments, but blessings; they are all stated positively, when most commandments begin negatively: *“You shall not...”*; Jesus needs only 8, not 10; and these are much more surprising instructions than the commandments.

Each begins with a word most often translated “*Blessed*.” Again in good Jewish fashion Matthew puts this in the passive voice. If they were in active voice, the implied subject is clearly God. In other words, God is doing the blessing, but Matthew avoids the holy name of God, when possible. Some English translations emphasize the superlative nature of this blessing by translating it “*Truly blessed*” Others translator simply use “*Happy*”, because, when God blesses you, you are happy—truly happy.

We should note again the surprising situations or status of the blessed:  
*the poor in spirit; those who mourn; the meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.*

The world would say the folks who are happy are exactly the opposite: those rich in spirit—and rich in things too; those who have nothing to cry about; the aggressive; those who hunger and thirst for what they want and go get it; the tough guys—or gals—who show no mercy; those who don’t get caught; the victors in the conflict; and those who fend off persecution—any discomfort!—like the plague.

But surprisingly we see Jesus’ point, when we look at what is gained:

*The poor in spirit...receive the kingdom of heaven.*

*Those who mourn...will be comforted.*

*The meek...will inherit the earth.*

*Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...will [have their appetites satisfied].*

*The merciful...will receive mercy.*

*The pure in heart...will see God.*

*The peacemakers...will be called children of God.*

*Those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake... will [likewise] receive the kingdom of heaven.*

Living this way puts us in that realm of God, which is its own blessing. Remember this realm is not someplace else, somewhere in the future, something beyond us; we can live it in now—and Jesus shows us how.

The beatitudes are **not** saying we should seek out the negative situations. Jesus himself knew how to be rich in spirit, to rejoice at a

wedding or a banquet, to be assertive about the things that are right & just, to enjoy good food and wine, and to call people in the wrong to accountability, etc. But, Jesus also knew, when things went against him or us, God is still with us—which is the greatest blessing of all.

When we are facing trials, we will be better not to be drug down to the level of those who are making problems for us—and others. We will be better and the world will be better—and closer to God’s kingdom!—when **we** are merciful, can cry in our own pain, and with others in their pain, are humble rather than haughty, seek what is right and just for all—especially the weakest, exemplify mercy, act out of pure motives, seek to bring peace and work for reconciliation, and are willing to put ourselves out—and to even suffer—for what is right and of highest value.

Living this way does not mean we will always be winners, but we will be right with ourselves, right with our neighbors, and right with God. Plus we will not be trapped in the dog-eat-dog world. We will live in that different realm, where we know God is. How do we do that? We follow the example and teaching of Jesus.

Indeed right now in our nation & world, there is a lot to mourn about, and we should grieve with all who are in sorrow. There is so much need for mercy, and we can extend some. There is much that needs corrected, and we can hunger to help make things right. Peace among people is badly needed, and we can work to bring reconciliation.

The worst thing we could let happen is to lose our values, **if and when** they are also the **values of God’s realm**. If we follow Jesus we will not be brought down to the “way of the world”. As the Body of Christ we look to a different standard. We are called to live according to the realm of God; **and in that we are blessed**.