What Does it Mean to Seek the Kingdom of God?  
Matthew 6:33 and Luke 12:31 in the Contexts of  
the Sermon on the Mount and the Lucan Parables

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Introduction

What will I eat? How will I pay the bills? How will I have a happy marriage? How will I have a successful career? Everyone seems to be preoccupied with these kinds of concerns, but Jesus calmed his disciples by giving them a higher purpose. He told them not to worry about their needs in this world, but to instead seek God’s kingdom, having the promise that their heavenly Father would then also meet all those needs: “...do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (Matt 6:31-33, RSV). The parallel account omits “and his righteousness” and adds an assurance: “...seek his kingdom, and all these things shall be yours as well. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:31-32). The first step in understanding what it means to seek the kingdom of God is to determine what Jesus meant by “his kingdom.” This is because Jesus used the word translated as kingdom in a way that is very different from the typical usage of kingdom in English as the land or people ruled by a king.
In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the “kingdom of God” is usually God’s active rule over his creation, especially in saving his people from their sins and the consequences of those sins. (Matthew often uses “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God,” but the two terms are synonymous (Matt 13:31a = Mark 4:30 = Luke 13:18), so “kingdom of heaven” does not refer to heaven as a place, but to God’s reign as King, reflecting the Jewish avoidance of direct reference to God.) The kingdom of God is not only God’s rule over his obedient subjects, but includes his victory over their spiritual enemies through Jesus, beginning in the present age (Matt 12:28; Luke 1:68-75; 11:20). The kingdom of God has been concisely defined as God’s “acting in his sovereign power to deliver man from the destructive powers that enslave him” (Beasley-Murray, 1989). The central thesis of Ladd (1974) is that the prophets’ hope of the kingdom of God was inaugurated in the person of Jesus in this present age, before its consummation begins the age to come. God asserted His rule in history by defeating Satan and death through the work of Jesus, even though God will not complete his display of authority until Jesus returns in judgment, when he will start the new world order.

<table>
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<th>Kingdom of God in Matthew, Mark, and Luke ('seek first' the salvation of God’s reign)</th>
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<td><strong>Literal</strong>&lt;br&gt;God’s rule (incl. Satan’s defeat)</td>
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However, Ladd (1974, ch. 8, pp. 205-217) pointed out that the kingdom of God does not always literally mean the dynamic reign of God, but that it sometimes refers to the gift of life and salvation achieved by that reign. Jesus’ disciples are to seek the kingdom as the most valuable of possessions and the Father gives the kingdom to them (Matt 6:33; 13:44-46; Luke 12:31-32). Those who receive the kingdom in the present age will enter the kingdom in the age to come (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:16-17). Those who are poor in spirit, who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, have the kingdom (Matt 5:3, 10). When the Son of Man comes (Matt 25:31), the righteous will inherit the kingdom (v. 34); kingdom here is the same as eternal life (v. 46). Inheriting eternal life, inheriting the kingdom, and receiving eternal life are equivalent (Mark 10:17, 23-24, 30) and are associated with being saved (v. 26). This salvation involves saving one’s true life, as opposed to saving one’s life in this age (Matt 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 17:33), and culminates in bodily resurrection (Luke 20:34-36) and restored communion with God in the age to come (Matt 5:8; 25:21, 23; Mark 14:25; Luke 14:16-24). Although the kingdom concept is primarily oriented to the future, Jesus also brought salvation and fellowship with God to the present age (Luke 19:10-11; Mark 2:15-19), though to a lesser, incomplete degree. Such salvation included other gifts enjoyed in this life, such as physical healing (Mark 5:34; 10:52), temporary resurrection (Matt 11:4-5), deliverance from demonic possession (Luke 8:36), forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; 2:10; Luke 7:48), and righteousness (Matt 6:33).

That the kingdom of God to be sought (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31) is this gift of salvation brought by the rule of God, rather than the rule of God itself, will also be seen below. To seek the kingdom of God is to actively receive the eternal life that Jesus brought. Seeking salvation does not end at the time of conversion, but continues throughout the life of each disciple of Jesus. What this entails will become clear from looking at the kingdom-seeking passages in the context of Luke and its
sequel (Acts) and in the context of Matthew. Matthew’s version is treated second since it is complicated by the exhortation to seek God’s righteousness as well as his kingdom.

**Luke-Acts on seeking the kingdom**

Through parables and illustrations from nature, Jesus contrasted seeking the future salvation of the kingdom with seeking the pleasures of this age (Luke 12:13-46). In the parable of the rich fool (vv. 13-21), Jesus rebuked a man for being overly concerned about receiving his share of the inheritance, as if one’s wealth is the measure of success in life. The rich man of the parable depended on the wealth he had accumulated to take care of him in the future, but found that all his work was in vain since he had not provided for his future after his death. Expanding on the lesson of the parable (“therefore,” v. 22), Jesus later gave the discourse on anxiety to his disciples (vv. 22-31). He told them not to worry about the needs of this life because, since God cares for the birds and the lilies, which do not toil, he will much more readily provide for his children. Rather than worrying about earthly needs, like the nations do, Jesus’ disciples must seek the kingdom of God, with the promise that God will meet all those needs. These injunctions are not two independent arguments against worrying, the first based on God’s fatherly care for his creation and the second based on seeking the kingdom, but are part of the same argument since God is both Father and King of his people (Beasley-Murray, 1989). It is not that God only gives his people food and clothing only to the extent that they seek his kingdom: God richly provides for even those with “little faith” (v. 28) because he values them far above the birds and flowers. The Father will always meet the needs of those who seek the kingdom,¹ however imperfectly, since they are the ones who are truly his

¹ This interpretation overlooks the Father’s provision for the unjust (Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:17). A more solid exposition distinguishes how to overcome anxiety—believe the Father will feed and clothe you (Luke 12:22-24, 27-30)—from why to overcome anxiety—it serves no purpose (vv. 25-26) and
children. That seeking the kingdom is not an isolated action, but a way of life for Jesus’ disciples, is also seen in the description of Joseph as a good, righteous man who looks for the kingdom (23:50-51). On the other hand, those who are not children of God do not even have “little faith,” which is accepted by God (17:5-6), but no faith, consistently seeking the things of this life (12:30), so Jesus told the disciples not to act like them, but like the children of God. Since the kingdom is something that one can seek instead of earthy things, it is something that can be possessed; in fact, the kingdom is a possession given by the Father (12:32). Thus, *kingdom* here is the salvation brought by Jesus, as noted in the Introduction. In addition to the blessings of salvation, God promised to give His children what they need in this age (Luke 12:31). Ladd (1974, p. 137) inferred from the fact that “all these things” are *added* to the kingdom that the kingdom can be experienced in the present age. It is true that salvation is experienced to some extent upon conversion; this includes the present gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; 11:9-13; Acts 1:5; 2:38-41; 8:20), who brings boldness in proclamation, wisdom, comfort, faith, and joy (Acts 4:31; 6:3-5; 9:31; 11:24; 13:52). However, in the next saying (Luke 12:32-34), Jesus made it clear that the kingdom will be primarily enjoyed in the future: the blessings of the kingdom are described as eternal treasures in the heavens. Although, like the kingdom (Luke 18:17), these heavenly treasures are said to be possessed now, the contrast with the temporary treasures of the earth reinforces the message of the parable that led to the discussion on worry: the future state is far more important than the present state (vv. 13-21). The theme of seeking future, eternal treasure rather than present, temporary treasure is continued in the parables that follow immediately (12:35-46). In two of these parables, servants must be ready for the coming of their master, and in the third, a householder must be ready for the

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*distracts you from seeking the treasure of the kingdom* (vv. 31-34). The unconditional promise that your compassionate Father will satisfy your needs frees you to seek with abandon what is truly valuable (vv. 30-31; 10:38-42).
coming of a thief. In each case, the unexpected coming represents the coming of the Son of Man in judgment at an unknown time in the future. In this context, being ready means seeking the kingdom of God rather than earthly treasure (vv. 30-34). Thus, when the Son of Man comes, those who are found seeking the kingdom will be rewarded (vv. 38, 42-43), but those who are found seeking immediate pleasure will be punished and put with the unfaithful (vv. 45-46). The message of these parables, to be ready for future judgment, is the same as that of the parable of the rich fool, where the unexpected judgment occurs at death rather than at the coming of the Son of Man.

Jesus also warned his disciples to be ready for his coming in his eschatological discourse (Luke 21:5-36). When the disciples saw all the things related to the destruction of Jerusalem, which would take place in their generation (Ladd 1974, pp. 320-321), they would know that the kingdom of God, in the coming of the Son of Man, was near (vv. 20-33). The coming of the kingdom will mean redemption for the disciples (v. 28), but will come unexpectedly to the rest of the world (v. 34-35). Thus, disciples must be ready for that day by making sure that their hearts do not become weighed down with gluttony, drunkenness, or the cares of this life (v. 34), which is what happened to those who, having heard the word of the kingdom, later fell away because of temptation or the cares, riches, and pleasures of life (8:13-14); temporary deliverance from demonic power is of little value (11:24-26). Jesus was again teaching that one’s heart reveals where his or her treasure is: the heart that seeks the kingdom will have treasure in heaven, but the heart that seeks the things of this life will only have treasure on earth (12:30-34). The disciples were to pray not only that they would be ready for the coming of the Son of Man, but also that they would escape the things that would take place in their generation (21:36). The historical judgment on Jerusalem pointed to the eschatological judgment on the whole world, following the pattern of the Old Testament prophets: “the proclamation
of the future visitations of God, both historical and eschatological, are designed to bring God’s people into conformity with the divine will in the present” (Ladd 1974, p. 69, cf. p. 315). That disciples pray to be able to stand before the Son of Man at his coming (21:36) shows that they seek to persevere and receive the kingdom by God’s power, not by their own effort, as will also be clear from the eschatological discourse in Matthew. Those who would undergo persecution were specifically promised eternal life as compensation for their endurance (vv. 16-19; 6:22-23), so they were not left in doubt as to whether they would remain in the kingdom. The need to persevere is seen in the case of Judas, who, although numbered with the disciples, eventually revealed his heart and did not ultimately receive the kingdom (Luke 22:22; Acts 1:25). The faith of Peter, on the other hand, did not fail, but only because God answered the prayer of Jesus (Luke 22:31-32), not because of the strength of Peter’s will (22:33). Paul encouraged later disciples to remain in the faith and in the grace of God, even in the face of persecution, since only in so doing would they inherit the kingdom of God (Acts 13:43; 14:22).

Jesus also exhorted his followers to be ready for the future judgment in his teachings on discipleship. Just as the Son of Man had to suffer before his exaltation, those who follow him must daily deny themselves and give up their lives in this world to save their lives for the kingdom at his coming; this daily carrying of the cross includes exposure to persecution for Jesus and his words (Luke 9:22-26). In fact, it involves a renunciation of everything in the present age, including family members (14:25-33). For some, this renunciation entails an actual loss of family relationships (9:57-62) or of earthly possessions for treasures in heaven (18:22-30), as was seen in the discourse on seeking the kingdom (12:31-34). Such loss is compensated not only with eternal life in the age to come, but also with family and possessions in the present age (18:29-30); this is an instance of the Father’s provision for the earthly needs of those who seek the kingdom instead of seeking those needs (12:22-31).
That disciples are compensated with eternal life for their sacrifices does not imply that the compensation is an earned payment. It is impossible for people to enter the kingdom by their own ability; the willingness to renounce everything for the kingdom can only come from God and was not given to everyone (18:22-30). The repentance leading to seeking the kingdom above material gain (3:8-14) is a gift from God and the exalted Lord Jesus (Acts 3:26; 5:31; 11:18), given only to those appointed for eternal life (13:48). As noted above, disciples constantly rely on God for the ability to persevere in seeking the kingdom and to stand before the Son of Man when he comes in judgment (Luke 21:34-36). Thus, they regularly pray for God to forgive them and to keep them from falling into temptation (11:4). Indeed, Jesus came to save God’s people (2:11; 19:10) from their spiritual enemies, since they are helpless to save themselves, so that they can serve him in holiness and righteousness (1:71-77) under the rule of Jesus (1:31-33). Sinners who in faith seek this deliverance as an unmerited gift will be forgiven and justified rather than those who rely on their own righteousness (18:9-14; Acts 13:38-39; 15:10-11) since even flawless obedience would fail to make them worthy of the kingdom (Luke 17:7-10). Jesus freed his disciples from anxiety and fear by assuring them that their Father will give them the kingdom they seek (12:31-32). So, as Calvin (1845) commented, “When Christ plainly declares, that God hath given us the kingdom, and for no other reason, but because it so pleased him, it is perfectly manifest, that it is not obtained by any merits of works.”

The contrast between anxiously seeking the cares of this life and confidently seeking the salvation of the kingdom (Luke 12:22-34) is exemplified in the account of Martha’s excessive preparations and Mary’s learning from Jesus (10:38-42). Jesus rebuked Martha for being worried and bothered with “many things,” things that the

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2 Nonetheless, the Triune God sincerely offers salvation to those who will ultimately refuse it (Luke 13:33-34; Acts 7:51).
nations of the world also anxiously seek (12:29-30). She was not reprimanded for attending to the things of the house, but for doing so to the point of distraction and for criticizing Mary for not sharing her anxious toil. Jesus commended Mary for instead seeking the “one thing” that was truly needed, the salvation present in the word of the kingdom (4:18; 8:10-11, 15).

The parables that complement the parables surrounding the discourse on anxiety expand on the idea that seeking the treasure of the kingdom leads to sharing with the poor (Luke 12:31-33). The parables of Luke 10:25-18:14 are arranged as a chiasmus (ABC…CBA), so that the first parable is parallel to the last parable, the second to the next-to-last, etc. This structure can be seen by listing each group of parallels with the same degree of indentation and color:

The good Samaritan (10:25-37)

The friend at midnight (11:5-8)

The good Father, beginning with “Who of you…?” (11:11-13)

The rich fool (12:13-21)

The demands of stewardship (12:35-48)

Three warnings to repent (13:1-9)

The mustard seed and yeast (13:18-22)

The lower place at the banquet (14:7-10)

The proud will be humbled (14:11a)

The humble will be exalted (14:11b)

The banquet invitations (14:15-24)

Considering the cost of discipleship (14:25-33)

Three parables of the lost coming to repentance (15:1-32)

The dishonest steward (16:1-13)

The rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31)

The unworthy slaves, beginning with “Who of you…?” (17:7-10)
The persistent widow (18:1-8)

The Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9-14).

Thus, the parables just before and just after the discourse on anxiety (12:22-34), the parable of the rich fool and the parables of stewardship demands, complement the parable of the dishonest steward and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The parallel stewardship parables illustrate different truths: that servants of the Son of Man must be found faithful when he returns (12:35-48) and that they must shrewdly distribute their unrighteous money to others if they are to have true, eternal wealth since the use of money reveals whether they serve it or God (16:1-13). The implication is that using one’s wealth to help the poor is necessary to being found faithful at the coming of the Son of Man. In both the parable of the rich fool and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a rich man loses everything when he dies. Reading the parables together, failure to be “rich toward God” is manifested in failure to give generously to the poor. Those who are overly concerned about providing for themselves in this life do not tend to think they can afford to provide much for others. Between the parable of the dishonest steward and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a brief exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees (16:14-15). In loving money to the point of scoffing at Jesus’ parable of the dishonest steward and in their self-justification before men, they embodied seeking treasure on earth, like the nations of the world, rather than seeking the kingdom of God (12:30-33; 22:23-30). Jesus contrasted the worldly values of men with the values of God, who knows the heart: “what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (16:15). The conclusion of the chiasmus of parables (18:14) also condemns the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, echoing the center of the chiasmus (14:11): “every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” In other words, those who proudly seek earthly wealth or recognition will eventually
lose everything, but those who humbly seek the kingdom of God will enter it when the Son of Man comes in his glory.

**Matthew on seeking the kingdom**

The discourse on anxiety in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 6:25-34) has a different context and three main internal differences from the parallel passage in Luke-Acts (Luke 12:22-32): the addition of “first,” the addition of “and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33; cf. Luke 12:31), and an alternate saying at the end of the discourse (Matt 6:34; cf. Luke 12:32). While these dissimilarities reflect different emphases, they do not alter the essence of the message that the salvation of the kingdom must be sought above all earthly cares.

The “therefore” at the start of the discourse (Matt 6:25) refers back to three passages that contrast loving God with loving riches (vv. 19-24). The first of these (vv. 19-21) is essentially the same as the parallel in Luke-Acts (Luke 12:33-34), except that the Sermon on the Mount has “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth” (Matt 6:19) in place of “Sell your possessions and give alms” (Luke 12:33). Matthew’s version appears to be more generally applicable since while all believers were to seek heavenly treasure above earthly treasure, not all were to literally give all their wealth to the poor (Luke 3:10-14; 8:1-3; 19:1-10; Acts 5:4). Just as the heart determines whether one’s treasure is in heaven or merely on earth (Matt 6:19-21), one’s eye (what is looked to as the source of satisfaction) determines whether his or her body is full of light or darkness (vv. 22-23). This is because no one can love and serve both God and riches; one will always take priority over the other (v. 24). “Therefore” (v. 25), instead of anxiously seeking the food, drink, and clothing that the Gentiles seek, God’s children are to seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness (vv. 25-33). Thus, as in Luke-Acts, salvation, with an emphasis on the
future enjoyment of eternal life, takes precedence over the material possessions of
the present age.

The modification of “seek” with “first” (Matt 6:33) in the Sermon on the Mount
guards against the misunderstanding that the needs of this life should not be
attended to at all. The need of food is important enough that it is to be prayed for
daily, along with the more important blessings of the kingdom (vv. 11-13). Disciples
are to handle each day’s earthly concerns as they arise, rather than to anxiously
worry about the next day’s concerns as if God does not provide for those who seek
his salvation and righteousness (vv. 33-34). It follows that saving money is not in
itself condemned, but seeking eternal life and service to God must always take
priority in the heart (vv. 19-24).

In the context of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the “righteousness” to be
sought with the kingdom (6:33) includes obedience to the law of Moses, but the
righteousness of those in the kingdom surpasses that of the respected teachers of
the law, the scribes and Pharisees (5:17-20). In his diatribe against the scribes and
Pharisees (23:1-36), Jesus exposed their righteousness as based on the values of the
present age rather than on those of the kingdom of God:

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3 Seeking God's "righteousness" might instead mean seeking God's will, not in the sense of moral
goodness, but "in the sense of God's saving activity," and thus "righteousness" may be an explanation of
has the strength of identifying righteousness with the kingdom as the "one thing" needed. The ethical
definition has also been combined with the redemptive-historical definition: "The command to seek this
righteousness means seeking what God has rightly done in Jesus. In the Christian community, prayers
for wealth and for ordinary, necessary things are to be replaced with prayers asking for God's righteousness
of love and reconciliation. The person who prays for this righteousness need not pray for anything else, as
all these things will be given to him" (p. 224 of D. P. Scaer, The Sermon on the Mount: The Church's First
Statement of the Gospel, 2000, Concordia Publishing House). This Christological interpretation holds that
"Christ's promise in the Sermon to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (5:18) is his own affirmation of their
authority for requiring his death (26:24, 31, 54), but by fulfilling them, he assumes them into himself and
preserves them in his teachings. His words now take the place of honor (28:20). The Father's command to
listen to Jesus (17:5) applies first to the Sermon on the Mount and then to the entire gospel of Matthew" (p.
270). Indeed, Jesus did not come as yet another legal expert: he denounced those teachers of the law
whose rigidly literal interpretations ironically underemphasized its most demanding commands while at the
same time laying heavy burdens on the Jewish people (e.g., 12:1-14; 15:1-20; 23:1-39). In sharp contrast,
Jesus gently invited those who bore heavy burdens to come to him for rest (11:28-30).
1. They did all their righteous deeds to be noticed and honored by men, keeping the visible, external parts of the law but neglecting its demand for a clean, sincere heart (vv. 5-12, 23-28).

2. They not only refused to enter the kingdom, but they prevented others from entering (v. 13).

3. Viewing gold as more important than the temple, they broke vows for the sake of material gain (vv. 16-22).

4. They would kill the true messengers of God (vv. 29-36).

Ultimately, their “righteousness” was only an appearance of righteousness before men (v. 28). Much of the Sermon on the Mount contrasts this superficial righteousness, which has value only in the present age, with the righteousness of God, the righteousness needed to enter the kingdom in the age to come (7:21-27). Those who gave alms, fasted, and prayed to be seen by men already had the reward they were seeking, but those who did so in secret would be rewarded by God in the future (6:1-8, 16-17). True righteousness extends to the heart (5:3, 8), which cannot be seen by men, and even includes active love for enemies (5:38-47) and the avoidance of sinful states of mind like anger (5:21-26), lust (5:27-32), insincerity (5:33-37), greed (6:19-24), and unbelief (6:30-32). Such a pure heart does lead to righteous actions that are seen by men, but for God’s glory, not man’s glory (5:14-16; 7:15-20). The truly righteous ones do not exalt themselves above others, as the Pharisees did (23:6-12), but are humble, merciful, forgiving, and nonjudgmental (5:5, 7; 6:14-15; 7:1-2; cf. 18:1-4, 21-34). They value life in the kingdom so much that they would sacrifice anything in the present life to attain righteousness (5:29-30). Therefore, above all other things, they seek entrance to the kingdom in the age to come by seeking righteousness in the present age (6:33; cf. 25:31-46).

This righteousness of the kingdom is not for those who think that they are already righteous, but only for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6),
striving to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (5:48). Knowing that they need daily forgiveness from God because their flesh is weak, they rely on God to keep them from temptation and to deliver them from the evil one (6:12-13; 26:41). “God with us,” Emmanuel (1:23), is the one who delivers them, as when he demonstrated the presence of the kingdom by casting out demons (12:28). The name “Jesus” aptly summarizes his entire ministry of the kingdom: he saved his people from their sins (1:21). Thus, God’s righteousness is not merely God’s demand placed on man, as per Pryzybylski (1980, pp. 89-91), but is his gift to all of his children who ask for it (7:7-11). Their righteous obedience to the law and prophets, summarized in the Golden Rule, is a response to their Father’s inclination to answer their prayers (v. 12). Because of the caring Father’s provision, his children need not be any more anxious about attaining righteousness than about attaining their bodily needs (6:25-34); they can rejoice and be glad, knowing that they have treasure in heaven (5:10-12). Hence, the righteous find rest in following Jesus, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light (11:28-30).

That God answers requests for righteousness does not put the initiative of salvation in the hands of man. Rather, true prayer is an expression of faith (8:1-13; 9:27-29; 21:21-22; cf. 17:19-20 with Mark 9:28-29) and faith in the message of the kingdom is a gift from God. The Father revealed to Peter that Jesus is the Messiah (16:16-17). Likewise, the Father is known by those to whom the Son reveals him and the things of the kingdom are hidden from the rest (11:25-30). Jesus spoke in parables so that only the disciples could understand the message of the kingdom; outsiders were intentionally left in ignorance (13:10-18). Therefore, only those selected for revelation from God will have the faith needed to humbly seek his righteousness through prayer.

In the eschatological discourse (24:4-25:46), the righteous are three times called the “elect” (24:22, 24, 31). God would shorten the time of tribulation so that
the elect will be saved (v. 22). The false prophets and messiahs could even deceive the elect, if that were possible (v. 24). The elect will be with the Son of Man at his coming (v. 31). Thus, by the sheer will of God, the elect are certain to endure to the end (v. 13), to be found ready for judgment when the Son of Man comes (24:37-25:30). This readiness that secures entrance to the kingdom in the age to come consists in righteousness expressed in good works (25:31-46) and includes the renunciation of the disciple’s life that was emphasized above in the discussion of Luke-Acts (Matt 16:24-27). On that day, people will be judged for whether they had the kingdom-oriented righteousness demanded by the Sermon of the Mount, rather than the world-oriented righteousness of the Pharisees (7:21-49). Only that judgment will reveal with certainty who God’s elect are (13:24-30).

In conclusion, God graciously gives his elect the faith to persevere in seeking eternal life and deliverance from their sins as their first priority. They will not attain perfect righteousness in this age since the kingdom of God has not yet fully come. Even so, the righteousness that God gives them results in good works that will set them apart from the unrighteous in the day of judgment, when God will give his children the kingdom. Thus, in agreement with Luke-Acts, salvation in Matthew is not merited, but received purely by the grace of God. This reception of undeserved favor is clearly illustrated by the parable of the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16; cf. Ladd, 1974, pp. 301-302) and the parable of forgiveness (18:21-34; cf. Ladd, 1974, pp. 213-215). The forgiveness of the kingdom was bought with the blood of Jesus (26:28).

**Applications for modern believers**

According to Luke-Acts and Matthew, Jesus taught that disciples are to seek eternal life while knowing that they will have it as a free gift. All true Christians obey this to some extent, striving for righteousness by faith while knowing that they will
never deserve eternal life. However, since it seems that the assurance of having
treasure in heaven that cannot be lost would make actively seeking it unnecessary,
most Christians have focused on one aspect of Jesus’ teaching at the expense of the
other aspect. For example, many Christians rightly teach that the Christian life is a
life of actively seeking salvation from God, but without a proper understanding that
the Christian is assured of success, this ironically leads to anxiety, which Jesus’
teaching was meant to cure. Many other Christians correctly see that they can be
sure of their election to eternal life, but wrongly conclude that they need not seek
eternal life after having attained assurance that they will have it. For example, they
typically see no need to pray that they would be able to stand before the Son of Man
when he comes in judgment and some of them even say that it is possible to be
saved without living righteously. Since many Christians cannot see how “seek the
kingdom” can mean *receive eternal life*, they often reinterpret it to mean *strive to
bring others into the kingdom, seek the aspects of the kingdom that can be
experienced in the present age, or seek to obey the rule of God* (e.g., MacArthur,
2001). While these are all consequences of salvation and while they are entailed by
Jesus’ command to seek God’s righteousness, none of them captures the primary
meaning of Jesus’ command to seek God’s kingdom, to actively receive the eternal
life brought by God’s reign through Jesus. Seeking to persevere in the righteous path
to eternal life through faith in God’s sure promises to bestow it leads to peace and
joy rather than anxiety or complacency. Augustine and his followers were right in
teaching that being predestined by God is both necessary and sufficient for
continuing in faith and holiness; Christians are to strive to endure to the end, but
even that striving is by God’s grace, so they can know that they will endure. In
classical Reformed theology, this is known as the *perseverance of the saints*. 
Unfortunately, this doctrine is usually denied, misinterpreted as eternal security without the need for righteousness,\(^4\) or underemphasized.

A proper understanding of what it means to seek the kingdom of God has profound implications for those who put it in practice by confidently seeking righteousness and eternal life:

1. With faith in their Father’s promises to forgive them and freely give them the kingdom, they regularly pray that they will have more and more of God’s righteousness, rather than being led astray from the path of eternal life by Satan and the cares of this life.

2. Their focus on their Father’s promises frees them from anxiety and restless toil for earthly things since they realize that he will provide them with everything they need and will compensate them with eternal life for whatever lesser things they sacrifice for the sake of righteousness.

3. Their putting the things of this world in proper perspective leads them to generously give their resources, including their money, time, and energy, to express love for others.

4. Having forsaken the values of this age, they do their righteous deeds to please God, not to receive respect or approval from men. Thus, they

\(^4\) The Reformed (Calvinistic) system must itself bear some of the responsibility for such antinomianism, in spite of the strong Puritan emphasis on the law of Moses. The earlier Augustinian soteriology, as represented in the Lutheran confessions, more reliably presents not only Jesus’ heartfelt offer of salvation, but also his unbending demand for ultimate loyalty from all who receive that gift. This is not to discount exceptional Calvinistic efforts in this direction such as John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress and John Piper’s Future Grace. In practice, however, consistent Calvinists cannot really be motivated by Christ's repeated warnings about falling away from saving faith since they do not recognize that possibility. Perhaps for this reason, few confessional Presbyterians regularly follow their Smaller Catechism (Q.102) in praying that they would be kept in God’s kingdom. Consistent Lutherans, by contrast, perceive the need to persevere on the narrow path in order to attain "treasure in heaven," not out of uncertainty, but in grateful response to the exciting news that the kingdom is at hand and inherited through faith alone. Their theologians do not avoid the paradox; for example, The Strong Declaration of the Formula of Concord (bookofconcord.org) and The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel (C. F. W. Walther) accurately preserve the synoptic tension between unconditional election and Jesus’ teaching that all who remain in the kingdom do so by taking heed that their hearts are not weighed down with hedonism or the cares of this age. The Olivet Discourse in particular reflects this mysterious nature of predestination (Matthew 24:12-13, 22, 24).
strive for righteous thoughts and unseen acts as well as visible righteous acts.

In short, they remember that in the age to come, God will exalt those who humble themselves now, as he has raised his Son after his humiliating death. Jesus concluded his sermon, “Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who builds his house upon the rock...” (Matt 7:24).\textsuperscript{5}

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References


\textsuperscript{5} Those struggling with the assurance of salvation will benefit from holding Jesus' call to daily self-denial in balance with the repeated sins of his disciples. All of the original apostles repented and received his forgiveness except for Judas Iscariot, who had been a thief from the beginning. *Mark*, even more than Matthew and Luke, frankly portrays the failures of the eleven elect apostles while clearly distinguishing them from those who refuse to repent.


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Appendix: The nature of God revealed in the cross

Promises of the Creator’s provision for people’s needs in this age abound throughout the canonical writings. Are such promises exceptions to the rule that all Scripture confers hope (Romans 15:4), or do they imply that the hopefulness of Scripture regards not only hope in Christ seated above at the right hand of the Father, but also hope in having an improved life in this world?

Jesus dealt specifically with the relationship between eschatological hope and the needs of this life in his discourse on anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-34), the clarity of which has been clouded by reading preconceived ideas into the text. North American evangelicals naturally see in Matthew 6:33 a blessing only for the few who commit themselves to achievement in a purpose-driven life. In the words of Rick Warren,

> If you will commit to fulfilling your mission in life no matter what it costs, you will experience the blessing of God in ways that few people ever experience. There is almost nothing God won’t do for the man or woman who is committed to serving the kingdom of God. Jesus has promised, “[God] will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.”

Making God’s gift of “all you need from day to day” conditional on “serving the kingdom of God” would challenge the hopefulness of Scripture. Applied consistently, this interpretation leaves the believer asking, “Am I committed enough that I can depend on God to give me that rare blessing — or even to meet my needs?”

Jesus, however, did not tell his disciples to seek the kingdom, much less to serve the kingdom, in order to secure earthly blessings. (Warren’s changing seeking the kingdom to “serving the kingdom” accommodates the doctrine of eternal security, which makes literally seeking the kingdom unnecessary for believers.) Rather, Jesus relieved the disciples’ anxiety about the needs of this life with the argument that since the Father feeds and clothes even the birds and lilies, he will much more feed and clothe those of much more value. Had he taught that only the disciples have greater value than the lilies and birds, the disciples would have worried about whether they truly seek the kingdom. The thought behind the argument is instead that according to the Father’s love, a man is of much more value than the lower creation (Matthew 12:12). Indeed, the Father’s provision for people’s needs in this age does not depend on their seeking the kingdom, for his love extends to the unjust as well as the just (Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-27). Thus, Jesus gave the discourse on anxiety not to motivate the disciples to committed service driven by the prospect of a rare blessing, but to instill in those “of little faith” (Matthew 6:30; Luke 12:28)
a firm confidence in their Father’s love displayed in his care even for the birds, which “neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,” and for the lilies, which “neither toil nor spin.”

For only with such trust in his love can the disciples seek the kingdom (i.e., eternal life) by faith in the words of Jesus rather than by goal fulfillment or other human efforts (Luke 10:38-42). Since the Father who is pleased to give them the kingdom will also continue to provide everything they need in this age even without their anxious toil, they have nothing to fear and are freed from bondage to money (Matthew 6:19-24, 33; Luke 12:29-34).

This exhortation to seek good things, both of this age and of the age to come, by faith in the loving Father is also found in the address to “Our Father” that precedes all petitions of Lord’s Prayer (cf. Matthew 7:7-11). Luther’s Small Catechism explains,

“Our Father who art in heaven.” What does this mean? Answer: Here God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father. Accordingly, the discourse on anxiety has been presented as an expansion of this daily prayer (Matthew 6:11) of the disciples, and Paul also replaced anxiety with prayer (Philippians 4:6-7).

In conclusion, the promises that the Father lovingly satisfies the temporal needs of all sinners are hopeful, but not in the sense of turning disciples’ hope to earthly things. They were instead written to impart strong confidence that he is so benevolent that he valued the whole world enough to give his Son to purchase eternal life for it in spite of its unworthiness. How can I believe God’s love for all people (and thus for me) moved him to sacrifice his Son for us if I do not believe it moves him to meet our needs in this age? For Jesus did not portray God as a self-serving king who unpredictably dispenses his grace and who may or may not have decreed the covenant of grace. Rather, the Son revealed a heavenly Father who by nature lovingly and dependably gives to his creation rather than seeking his own. The enfleshed Word ultimately glorified the God who is love not by a humanly understandable display of power, but by being lifted up on the cross (John 1:14-18; 3:14-15; 8:28-30; 12:27-33; 17:1-5; 1 John 4:8-10).

Additional References


2. See the main text.


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