



NAC-USA
DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE

Midweek Experience Curriculum

FACILITATOR GUIDE

2015

January

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Session 1: The Kingdom of God

Additional Content

The Kingdom in the Bible

Matthew 5:3
Matthew 7:21
Mark 10: 23-25
Matthew 13: 24-33, 44-52
Matthew 16: 17-19
Matthew 18: 1-5, 21-35
Matthew 21:31, 43
Matthew 25:34
Mark 1: 14-15
Mark 4: 26-29
Mark 9:1
Luke 8:10
Luke 9:62
Luke 12: 31-34
Luke 13:18, 22-29
Luke 16:16
Luke 17: 20-21
Luke 19: 11-27
John 3:5
John 18:36
Revelation 12:10

The theme for our small group discussions this month is centered on an important concept that supports the direction of our January Sunday Sermons. If we are going to change our lives to become like Jesus Christ, then He must be visible to us. How do we see Him today? How do we know what He wants us to do with our lives? The answer can be found in two places: In His teachings and in His example. That's so simple: It's what He said and what He did. Together, they comprise His Gospel, the good news of salvation. As we examine these two concepts over the next few weeks, let's make a very conscious and intentional effort to go beyond just learning Bible facts. Let's discuss how His teachings and His example can transform our lives. We should continually ask ourselves the question: Where will I apply this in my life today?

Let's also be very conscious of opportunities to share our moments of inspiration with each other.

Profession is a powerful and necessary component of Christian life. Likewise let's also look for opportunities to grow closer to each other in fellowship and to support each other in prayer.

So very much of Christ's teachings revolved around the Kingdom of God. Early in His ministry, the concept is introduced both by John the Baptist and by Jesus Himself in very similar pronouncements. In the first chapter of Mark we can read: *Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*

Going Deeper

The road not taken...

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proposes a definition of happiness wildly different from anything we are accustomed to hearing. How do we square these two vastly diverging road maps?

The problem may well be that we are trying to overly Jesus' road map on top of our culture's. Instead of trying to synchronize them, the better option may well be seeing where the paths end up.

In Robert Frost's famous poem "The Road Not Taken," he writes of the choice that lay before him, and indeed before us all:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth...

For many of us who follow the road our culture sets out for us, the initial way may look very appealing. Who would not want to have a healthy family or provide for their household? Although we recognize the "undergrowth," that is, the tangled roots that might trip us up, the trouble appears to be worth it. Then somewhere down the way, the culture's promises turn out to be erratic, and there are traps and dead ends that we did not expect. We hurl ourselves at work, yet we find ourselves spending more and more time there at the expense of our relationships, with no guarantee of success. We pursue every medical test available, yet sooner or later our bodies fail us. We chase after power, but then find out that we always have to defend it. We aspire to popularity, but then can never say anything controversial, lest someone dislike us.

Beginning with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began to describe the Kingdom of God. Sometimes He taught about it directly and sometimes He used different analogies found in His teaching parables.

Although there is disagreement on the exact number of parables told by Jesus, we can see in excess of thirty-three of these stories and many of them begin with the words "The Kingdom of God is like this"...and "the Kingdom of God is like that"....

He painted an unusual, sometimes seemingly contradictory picture especially in light of the cultural norms of that time and place. Sometimes the Kingdom was a place yet to come but sometimes it was right here, and right now. Sometimes it was small like a mustard seed or invisible like yeast. Sometimes it wasn't a place at all but rather an attitude or condition of the soul.

We should put ourselves in the place of the actual listeners at the time of Jesus and try to understand how His teaching must have affected them. The coming of the Kingdom of God must have seemed like such an appealing concept to the Jewish people who had seen their kingdom dismantled and were subjugated under Roman rule. They waited for their Messiah to come and restore the independence and glory of their kingdom. In their minds, perhaps they could see their return to power, might and prominence as in the days of David and Solomon. But wait a minute, when Jesus began describing His Kingdom, it didn't look at all like the picture they had in their minds.

Equally puzzling were the people who Jesus invited into the Kingdom. Can you picture the opening moments of the great Sermon on the Mount? Try to visualize this scene in your minds, this great outdoor classroom as described by Matthew:

And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Seriously? The poor in spirit? What kind of Kingdom is this? What happened to the rich, the powerful, the privileged and the learned? Why isn't it their Kingdom? This doesn't sound quite so attractive. Then He spoke of some others; the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers. Those who mourn, those who are reviled and persecuted, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and those who are falsely accused for His sake, are all promised an exceedingly great reward in heaven. Very puzzling.

Discussion Questions:

- When and where in your life do you feel the Kingdom of God is most "near at hand?"

- **TAKE HOME:** Read through the listed Bible references to the Kingdom of God. How can these descriptions of the Kingdom be applied to your life tomorrow? Are there descriptions of the Kingdom of God that trouble you? Confuse you? Write them down.

Session 2: The temptations of Christ

Going Deeper

Using Scripture

In the temptations, Jesus and the devil argue Scripture, and both are adept in it, though the devil quotes Scripture out of context and so values its wording over its meaning. Notice too that whereas Jesus uses Scripture to teach him God's will, the devil presents it merely as promises to be exploited for one's own purposes... Jesus' specific Spirit-led behavior in this model is significant: He already knew God's commands and their context, and for him to know was to obey.

How do we interpret this example of Jesus in our lives? What does it tell us about how well we should know Scripture? How can we use Scripture in our lives?

There is a correlation between Jesus and Israel in the temptations that He faces (Matthew 4: 3, 5-6, 8-9). Jesus' responses to each temptation not only cite lessons from Israel's wilderness experiences in Deuteronomy (8:3, 6:16, and 6:13); the lessons or temptations mirror those particular struggles when Israel failed to sustain their trust in God.

How do the temptations illustrate our own struggles with trust in God? Our struggles in being a disciple?

Welcome back! In our first session, we covered a lot of ground regarding the January theme of the visible Christ. He is visible to us in His teaching and His example. His teachings were found in the Sermon on the Mount and in His teaching parables. His teachings centered on the concept of the Kingdom of God. The concept of the Kingdom of God has many facets but can be categorized into the present Kingdom that we can experience today and the future Kingdom to come. The present Kingdom is a state of heart and mind where God reigns within us and we give Him rule over us out of our love for Him. This state of soul is supported and empowered by the Word of God and the sacraments experienced within the church of His Son, Jesus Christ. The future Kingdom to come is ushered into existence when Christ returns to this earth and finally and completely defeats the power of evil and eliminates its existence from mankind.

In this session, we will discuss how Christ is visible through His example and we will focus on the three temptations of Christ in the wilderness.

Often, we see people who teach or give advice. Sometimes we are disappointed when we see them in their personal lives and their conduct is at odds with their advice. Jesus conduct was every bit as instructional as His teaching. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, we can find an account of Jesus being led into the wilderness where He was tempted by the devil. The details are important, both as to the nature of the temptation and the manner in which Jesus responded to it.

In the first temptation we can read the following account from the fourth chapter of Matthew starting in the first verse:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

What can we learn from these verses?

Going Deeper

Loving the gifts more than the Giver

When we are confronted by God's kingdom, the temptation is always to see it through the narrow lens of our own interests and aims. Each of the tests revolves around whether the kingdom of heaven is welcomed for God's sake or the sake of something else. Do people love the kingdom of heaven itself or the prosperity (Matthew 4:2-4), protection (Matthew 4:6-7), and power (Matthew 4:9-10) it provides for them?

Through Jesus miracles the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the dead are raised, and demons are cast out. These are signs that he is the Messiah and the kingdom of heaven is at hand. If these are the reason people love him and desire the kingdom, then they are far from it indeed. The kingdom of God is realized in those who, like Jesus, orient their lives toward God and not around the things that God provides.

The temptation of Israel was to love the gifts of God more than the Giver. Similarly, in the church today, we are tempted to measure God's value by the realization of our own desires, rather than to conform ourselves, our desires, and our values to God's will.

In our lives, do we long for prosperity, security, and power? How does this align with Jesus demand that His disciples "deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

It is not as though any of these things is bad or evil. It is only when we prefer them to God that they betray our true purpose and joy. Read Matthew 6: 31-33 and discuss.

Timothy A. Beach-Verhey
Feasting on the Gospels

performs miracles in our lives to show us His love for us and His intent. But then He expects us to believe and to act on this belief.

Discussion Questions:

- Do we find ourselves continually asking (tempting) God to prove His love for us?
- Do we condition our continuing belief in Him on another round of proof?

Next, we should notice that the devil wraps his temptation up in a quote from the scriptures. Never think that he is ignorant of God's word or reluctant to use the promises of God as a means to sow seeds of doubt. Also notice the cunning way that the devil plays to human ego. God had revealed Himself to Jesus and a small group of witnesses at His baptism by John the Baptist at the river Jordan. The devil offered a different, grander version. Let God acknowledge Himself to you in front of the temple and all the movers and shakers of Jerusalem. How impressive to float down from the pinnacle of the temple carried by angels! Now that's the way to make a grand entrance, and truly fitting for the Son of God.

Think of how this would make His job easier later on because who could doubt Him after such a public display?

But Jesus is secure in the knowledge of His identity and firm in His acceptance of God's methods. His response is to also quote the scriptures: You shall not tempt the Lord your God!

Discussion Questions:

- Why does God so often put us on a path that requires humility to please Him?
- Do you wish that our church would be more impressive?
- Have you ever hoped for God to visibly intervene in a situation in your life to prove that you are right or to correct an injustice?

Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'

NAC Catechism

12.1.7.2.3

Your kingdom come

The kingdom of God has already dawned in Christ and is present in His church. "Your kingdom come" means that the Lord is to become more and more perceptible in the congregation.

Beyond that, these words allude to the revelation of the future kingdom of God, which will begin with the marriage of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-7). In this respect, the plea that the kingdom of God may come refers first and foremost to the return of Christ to take home His bride. However, this plea reaches even further into the future: after the marriage of the Lamb in heaven, the Son of God will establish His kingdom of peace on earth, in which the gospel will be preached to all human beings. The kingdom of God will appear in perfect glory and endure forever once God has created a new heaven and a new earth after the Last Judgement.

12.1.7.2.7

And do not lead us into temptation

With the plea not to be led into temptation, believers beseech God to help them resist sin with all their strength. Furthermore, they ask that the trials of faith may not be too severe and that they may be protected from many of the temptations of Satan. However, God will permit temptations in the form of trials in order to give believers a chance to prove themselves in faith. (Example - Genesis 22:1-18)

God watches over our faithfulness to Him so that it does not break: "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In our final session, I would like to go deeper into some additional attributes of Christ's teachings and example that are highly relevant to us today. We can begin by tracing the connection between the Lord's Prayer to His teachings of the Kingdom. We say this prayer in every divine service. With repetition comes the danger of creating a cliché or a lifeless recital. We risk losing the power and authentic meaning. Remember, the Lord's Prayer was Jesus response to a simple request by His disciples: teach us to pray! His prayer contains elements that bring the Kingdom of God alive within us and which help us overcome temptation as He did.

Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven... In this phrase I ask that the presence of the Kingdom of God comes into my life. I acknowledge that this happens when I give Him the ultimate authority in all matters; in my personal decision making, in my family, in my congregation.

Discussion Questions:

- Please share with the group, how do you personally remind yourself to keep the reign of God alive in your life?
- How do you discover the will of God? How do you know it's Him speaking to you?

Lead us not into temptation, Deliver us from the evil one... Here we ask God to guide us away from the influence of Satan and for the strength and wisdom to renounce the reign of sin in our life.

Discussion Questions:

- How do you identify the influence of evil in your life?
- How do you picture yourself actively renouncing the reign of sin and replacing it with the reign of God?
- Besides prayer, where do you get the strength to make this decision and to act on it?

For yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever... This phrase causes us to recognize the complete power and authority of God's Kingdom over evil. Christ could say that all power and authority was given to Him by His Father via His victory over sin and death. It is absolute and it is eternal.

Discussion Questions:

Apostle James wrote as follows concerning the temptation to sin: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God': for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (James 1:13-15). This reinforces the certainty that our heavenly Father - who through the Holy Spirit moves us to every good work and provides us with the strength to overcome our imperfections through the body and blood of Jesus - never tempts us to sin, but tests us to prove our faith.

12.1.7.2.8

But deliver us from the evil one

The plea "But deliver us from the evil one" expresses the wish that God may deliver us from tribulations that lead to sin. Furthermore, the evil from which we ask God to deliver us consists of everything that emanates from Satan. Ultimately this is a plea for final liberation from the evil one himself.

Through His sacrifice, Christ made redemption possible. In the Son of God we have "redemption..., the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14). Redemption is an ongoing process, which ultimately leads to perfect liberty from all of Satan's claims. Only then will our redemption be complete.

12.1.7.2.9

Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever...

These pleas are followed by an expression of praise to God, where-in the Most High is given the honor and glory He is due. He, the Lord of His kingdom, assists the believers with His power, so that they may share His glory in all eternity. This will be fulfilled for the bridal congregation at the return of Christ (Colossians 3:4).

- Do you sometimes feel that evil is winning in the world?
- How do you reconcile this with the absolute victory of Christ over sin?
- What effect does this have on your faith and hope in God's promise to you of eternal life?

Principles of the Kingdom

Now let's move to another concept. In His teachings, Christ redefined the old Mosaic Law. We should be clear about the guiding principles of the Kingdom of God and be guided in our conduct so that we can abide there. What are some of these principles?

Love God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself.

A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Judge not, lest you be judged.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.

Discussion Questions:

- Currently, how does living your life according to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission expand the Kingdom of God (Discuss each individually)?
- Do your own internal belief systems, customs, or culture conflict with the Laws or principles of the Kingdom?
- Which of these principles has been the hardest for you to incorporate into your life?
- Do you think these laws are negotiable?
- Can you share with the group; where are the opportunities to apply these laws in a more vigorous way in your life?
- How can your group support you?