

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 6

The Situational Perspective:
Pursuing Our Goal

Manuscript



thirdmill

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INTRODUCTION

A young soccer player in my church recently wrote an article that appeared in our local newspaper. In the article, he described soccer — or “football” as it is known in most parts of the world — as consisting of long periods of continuous play with very few goals. He went so far as to say that an ideal soccer match often ends in a score of one to zero.

Well, in some sense, ethical Christian living is a bit like an ideal soccer game. In the final analysis, we are in pursuit of a single grand goal, namely, the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. But this is not a goal we can reach instantly. In fact, God’s people have been striving toward this goal for thousands of years, and we have yet to reach it. Nevertheless, all our thoughts, words and deeds should contribute to the goal of glorifying God through the triumph of his kingdom.

This is the sixth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled it “The Situational Perspective: Pursuing our Goal.” In this lesson, we’ll focus on the overarching goal that God has laid out before us, namely, the success and triumph of his kingdom as it spreads from heaven to cover the whole earth. Throughout these lessons, we’ve emphasized that ethical judgment involves:

the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

This summary highlights the fact that there are three essential aspects to consider in any ethical question: God’s Word, the situation, and the person making the decision. These three concerns of ethical judgment correspond to three perspectives that we should take toward ethical issues: the normative perspective, which focuses on God’s revealed norms; the situational perspective, which concentrates on the importance of situations and circumstances; and the existential perspective, which directs attention to human beings.

In our previous lesson, we introduced the situational perspective on Christian ethics by emphasizing how important it is to understand the facts of our situation. Beyond this, we also considered the goals we seek to accomplish and the means we use to reach these goals. In this lesson, we’re turning our attention to just one of these situational considerations: the goals of Christian ethics. Specifically, we’ll focus on the kingdom of God as the ultimate or final goal of Christian ethics.

Our lesson will divide into three main sections. First, we’ll explore the circumstances of the kingdom of God, answering questions like: “What is the kingdom?” and “How does it manifest itself in history?” Second, we’ll consider life in the kingdom, focusing on our personal experiences within God’s kingdom and evaluating them in terms of the general goals that God has set for us. And third, we’ll describe the program for the kingdom, looking at some of the more specific goals God has ordained as means

to reaching the overarching goal of the kingdom. Let's begin with the circumstances of the kingdom of God.

CIRCUMSTANCES

The kingdom of God is a concept that throughout the history of the church has been controversial. Some think that the kingdom of God refers to the reign of God. Others think it has to do with a specific place. When we look at the Old Testament, we see that the Old Testament has at least a double emphasis concerning the kingdom of God. On the one hand, the Old Testament teaches that God has always been king. In this sense, he is the eternal King. He was king in the past, he is king in the present, and he will always be king. But in another sense, the other emphasis we have in the Old Testament is the message that God will one day come to rule the earth... Jesus has the same teaching. He tells us in the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that he taught us to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come." He doesn't say, "Take us into your kingdom," but he says, "Your kingdom come." That means that our Lord Jesus in his ministry had the same priority as his Father, that is to say bringing his kingdom of heaven to earth.

— Dr. David Correa, translation

We'll discuss three aspects of the circumstances of the kingdom of God. First, we'll explain the importance of the kingdom and show why the expansion of God's kingdom is the ultimate goal of Christian ethics. Second, we'll identify the components of the kingdom. And third, we'll explore the development of the kingdom throughout history. Let's first consider the importance of God's kingdom.

IMPORTANCE

As we've mentioned in prior lessons, ethical judgment should always have the proper goal in mind, and the highest goal of ethics is God's glory. But what we also need to realize is that God's glory is manifested in his kingship and in his kingdom. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture reveals that God is the king over all creation, and that the ultimate goal of history is to display his kingship through the reign of Christ. In this sense, we can think of God's kingdom as the overarching story of the whole Bible. God is most glorified through the establishment and triumph of his kingdom in Christ. That is to say, he will be most greatly honored when he is acknowledged by all creatures as the supreme creator God, the King over all. Paul had this ultimate end of history in mind in 1 Timothy 1:17, where he offered this doxology:

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and

glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17).

In light of this truth, when we speak of the glory of God as the highest goal of ethics, we're also saying that the kingdom of God is the highest goal of ethics.

We can see the importance of the kingdom of God in Christian ethics by considering Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. First, we'll look at the Beatitudes in chapter 5:3-12. Second, we'll consider the Lord's Prayer in chapter 6:9-13. And third, we'll focus on Jesus' teachings about earthly needs in chapter 6:25-34. In each of these sections, Jesus indicated that the kingdom of God must be the main priority in our lives. Let's begin with the Beatitudes.

Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12)

A beatitude is:

a statement about blessedness

Accordingly, Jesus' statements in Matthew 5:3-12 are called "beatitudes" because they each begin with the phrase, "Blessed are ...". And they list many things that God blesses.

It's very interesting that Jesus uses ... language that has to do with blessings, the beatitudes, of the kingdom... Jesus is working with the poor. They come to him in large numbers, and he is teaching them, he's healing them, and he's also preaching the gospel of the kingdom. And in the middle of this, a new chapter begins in which Jesus uses the language of poverty and says something so paradoxical. He says, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for they will receive the blessings of the kingdom," ... that the kingdom is theirs. And this is so interesting because, in that moment, this concept of having nothing, of not having anything spiritually, becomes a beatitude, a blessing to all the people.

— Dr. Saúl Cruz translation

Jesus' teachings on blessedness are important to our study of ethics because, as you'll recall, we have defined Christian ethics as:

theology viewed as a means of determining which persons, acts and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not

By this definition, whatever God blesses is morally good and right.

With the Beatitudes, Jesus began his sermon by encouraging people to live ethically. And significantly, he described blessings and ethics in terms of the kingdom of God. Consider just a few of the more obvious examples of this:

In Matthew 5:3, the blessing is, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The same blessing is repeated in verse 10. Although Matthew used the phrase “kingdom of *heaven*” here, many scholars have noted that this term is unique to Matthew’s gospel. They generally agree that it means the same thing as “kingdom of God.” In verse 5, the blessing is “they shall inherit the earth.” This is also a kingdom blessing, because it refers to the new earth that God will create when his kingdom comes in all its fullness. And in verse 9, the blessing is “they shall be called sons of God.” Even *this* statement of blessedness refers to the kingship and the kingdom of God. In the days of the Bible, human kings were often called “father” by their subjects. And the same is true of the Scriptures. God is often called “our Father” because he is our *royal* Father. So, in this verse, Jesus taught that God will be the royal Father, the loving king of his blessed children.

In one way or another, each of these blessings was closely related to the concept of the kingdom of God. And Jesus specifically set forth the blessings of God’s kingdom as the reward or goal that was to motivate his listeners to live ethically. He presented the kingdom of God as an essential focus for Christian ethics.

In addition to the importance of the kingdom in the Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, also focuses on the kingdom of God as the goal for ethics.

Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13)

Listen to the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-10:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10).

All four of these statements have a kingdom focus.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus acknowledged God as “Our Father.” But he specifically described God as our Father *in heaven*. The image of heaven throughout the Bible is the same: It is God’s throne room. So, when Jesus told his disciples to pray “Our Father in heaven,” he had in mind that they pray to God as their *royal* Father, the divine king enthroned in heaven, the great Father of his empire.

Then, in the first petition, “hallowed be your name,” Jesus instructed his disciples to revere God’s name. Scripture often equates God’s name with his person and authority. In the context of the Lord’s Prayer, this is a petition for all creatures to bow before God because of his unsurpassed kingly authority. In the second petition, “Your kingdom come,” Jesus exhorted his disciples to pray for the fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth. This was in keeping with his teaching that God is extending his heavenly kingdom to earth. In the third petition, “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus indicated that all creatures in heaven already obey God’s will. But Jesus instructed us to pray that all creatures on earth would obey the divine king in the same way. So, once again, we see that Jesus set forth the kingdom of God as a high priority for Christian ethics.

Now that we’ve looked at the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer, we’re ready to turn to the importance of the kingdom in Jesus’ teachings about earthly needs. This passage appears in Matthew 6:25-34.

Earthly Needs (Matt. 6:25-34)

Everyone has earthly needs, such as food and clothing. But Jesus taught that we should not experience anxiety over these issues. Instead, we should focus on God's kingdom. Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 6:31-33:

Do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" ... your heavenly Father knows that you need [these things]. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:31-33).

It's not wrong to give proper attention to earthly needs like food and clothing. But here, Jesus made it strikingly clear that seeking the kingdom of God is not just one of many goals we have as followers of Christ. Of all the goals we have in life, our first or primary concern should be the glorification of God through the triumph of his kingdom on earth.

As we've just seen, on several occasions in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made the ultimate goal of the Christian life very plain. The greatest end toward which we are to strive is the glorification of God through the triumph of his kingdom.

So far, in considering the circumstances of the kingdom, we've seen the importance of the kingdom of God and why it's the ultimate goal of Christian ethics. Now, we should examine the components of the kingdom.

COMPONENTS

We'll speak of three main components of the kingdom: the role of the king; the people or citizens of the kingdom; and the covenants that govern the relationship between the king and his people. Let's begin with the role of the king within the kingdom.

King

Modern people often have a difficult time understanding what it means to say that God is the ruler of his kingdom. Many of us have never lived under the authority of a human king. But in the ancient world of the Bible, people were very familiar with kings and kingdoms. In those days, kings were expected to fulfill their responsibilities to the citizens of their country. They were to protect and provide for them, and to treat them with kindness. Kings also had the legal authority to tax, to raise armies, and to regulate many aspects of life. Good kings ruled wisely to benefit their people. They worked hard to protect them from foreign powers as well as from natural and domestic problems.

The Bible frequently presents God as the suzerain, or supreme emperor, over all creation. And all the kings of the earth are his vassals, or servant kings, living on earth but rendering tribute to their superior in heaven.

“Suzerain” is just a big word that means a “great king,” and a “vassal” would be a smaller king, a lesser king, who is in relationship with this great king. Every one of the covenants of Scripture begins with God’s gracious initiative, that a great king is giving protection, giving land, giving benefits to a less powerful partner and is establishing this relationship. Not the junior partner, but the great partner, the great king, God, is establishing this relationship, first with creation, then we see it with Noah and the renewal of that. We see it also with Abraham. And so, God is the beginning, the one who initiates this relationship, and he gives gifts and benefits in that covenant relationship to carry out what he wants his reign to do his business in the world.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

We read these words in Psalm 103:19:

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

And Psalm 47:9 declares:

The kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted (Psalm 47:9, NIV).

God’s supreme rule as the king over all is a major theme that runs throughout the Bible. As the creator, God is king over all nations. But the Scriptures also teach that he was king in a special way over Israel in the Old Testament and over the church in the New Testament. In fact, when God established the throne of David over Israel, David’s throne represented the authority and power of God himself. Listen to the way 1 Chronicles 29:23 speaks of Israel’s human king:

Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king in place of David his father (1 Chronicles 29:23).

Notice that both David and Solomon sat on “the throne of the Lord” in Jerusalem. The throne still belonged to God, and the human kings of Israel sat on it only as his vassals. And in Matthew 5:34-35, Jesus confirmed that this was still the case in his day. Listen to the instruction he gave regarding oaths:

Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King (Matthew 5:34-35).

God ruled over Israel from his throne in heaven, and Jerusalem was still the earthly capital of his kingdom.

God's kingdom, in a very specific and special sense, involves Israel... God promised that they would reign in a special way in his place on earth, that he'd be a Father to these kings, and they would be his sons. Of course, Jesus comes as the great son of David in the New Testament in ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and promises made to David and his descendants in 2 Samuel 7. So, in this way, the kingdom of God is not only universal — all nations — not only universal including angels, but special including Israel through David and the dynasty God established through his descendants, and culminating in Jesus who is the son of David, who brings the kingdom of God in his first coming, who expands it in his ascension to the Father's right hand and then pouring out the Spirit at Pentecost, and who will come a second time to rule over the whole earth as indeed the great son of David and the Great King.

— Dr. Robert A. Peterson

We've seen that God is the king over all creation, and in a special way over Israel and the church. Now, we should turn our attention to the second component of the kingdom: the people or citizens who live in God's kingdom.

People

Since God is the emperor over all creation, there's a sense in which his reign has always been over every living person. But when the Bible speaks about the people of God's *kingdom*, it usually refers to the people that God has called to himself in contrast to the people of the world who follow the ways of evil. The Old Testament commonly speaks about Abraham and his descendants as the people of his kingdom. And the New Testament generally uses this language to speak about the church, since Christians of all ancestries have been adopted into the family of Abraham in Christ.

When God created the world, he set up humanity as his vassal kings. He appointed Adam and Eve, and the children they were to have, to rule over all creation as his servant kings. It was their job to govern all the animals, as well as themselves, for the success of God's kingdom. Listen to David's words in Psalm 8:5-6:

You have ... crowned [human beings] with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands (Psalm 8:5-6, NIV).

Referring to the creation account in Genesis 1, David indicated that humanity had been crowned and appointed ruler over the whole world and all its inhabitants. In short, God made human beings his vassal kings over creation.

In Genesis itself, we also learn that part of humanity's job was to make the whole world resemble the Garden of Eden. When God created the world, everything was good. But the only place that God planted in a manner fit for human habitation was the Garden of Eden. As we read in Genesis 2:8-9:

The Lord God planted a garden in Eden ... and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food (Genesis 2:8-9).

The garden was prepared for human beings and populated by human beings. And it was humanity's appointment as vassal kings to spread this pattern throughout the world. God stated this clearly in Genesis 1:28, where he gave this instruction to our first parents:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28).

God gave humanity the responsibility to populate the whole world, filling it with citizens of God's kingdom, and to improve it as God had improved the Garden of Eden. So then, from the very beginning, God's kingdom was global in its focus and destiny. God ruled directly over all humanity, and he intended the entire world to be his kingdom. And this continued from the time of Adam and Eve until the days of Abraham, who lived about 2,000 years before Christ. We read about this in Genesis 17:6, where the Lord made the following promise to Abraham:

I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you (Genesis 17:6).

In the days of Abraham, God narrowed his focus to a national level. He concentrated on Abraham's descendants as his special kingdom within his broader rule of the world. This national focus culminated in Jesus, the final vassal king over God's people on earth. Scripture teaches that Jesus spoke of his kingship often. For instance, in Matthew 27:11, we read of Jesus' conversation with Pilate:

Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so" (Matthew 27:11).

Under Jesus' kingship, the focus of God's kingdom became ecclesiastical, meaning that it was centered on the church. Through the gospel, salvation spread so successfully beyond the people and borders of Israel that the centerpiece of God's kingdom was no longer a single nation. It was the church throughout the world. God's kingdom now includes people from every race, and it continues to spread to the ends of the earth. Consider Revelation 5:9-10, where the heavenly song praising Jesus includes these words:

By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and

language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9-10).

Having spoken of the king and the people, we should mention a third component of the kingdom: the covenants that govern the relationship between them.

Covenants

A covenant is a common political arrangement in the world of the Bible, typically between a greater king and a lesser king, and so ... the divine-human covenants you see in the Bible mirror that because God uses that political convention in order to reveal himself in his relationship with his people. So, the biblical covenants between God and man are a greater king — that is, God — making an arrangement, a commitment, a relationship with a lesser — that is, the people of Israel.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

In the ancient world, suzerain kings often administered their great empires by imposing covenants or treaties upon vassal nations and their kings. These covenants typically mentioned the suzerain's goodwill toward the vassal, listed the vassal's obligations toward the suzerain, and stated the consequences of obedience or disobedience to these obligations.

Similarly, throughout the Bible, God administered his kingdom through covenants. His covenants expressed God's goodwill toward his people, listed the people's obligations toward God, and stated the consequences of obedience or disobedience to these obligations, specifically, blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

Life in covenant with God in every age, including our own, entails God's blessings for obedience and God's curses for disobedience... In some circles it's been very common to find that well-meaning Christians distinguish between different kinds of covenants in the Bible, and ... it's true that specific Bible passages that refer to God's covenants may emphasize God's promises or emphasize the requirements of human loyalty, but when we read the larger context, the larger scope of the relationships between God and his people, the people who are in covenant with him, you can find that every single covenant in the Bible is initiated and sustained by God's kindness. And each covenant also obligated his people to glorify him through loyal service in furthering his kingdom... Now to be sure, God always reserves his royal prerogative to pour out his blessings and to pour out his curses according to his own supreme wisdom as he wanted to do it. And how God chose to do this is often inscrutable; it's difficult for us to understand sometimes. Yet divine covenants were crucial for

Christian ethics throughout the ages from New Testament days all the way to our own day because all covenants between God and people required human loyalty. And they all offered blessings for obedience, and they all — including the New Testament covenant — threaten curses for disobedience.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

It's common to speak of six major covenants between God and his people. The Bible speaks of God's covenant with Adam in Hosea 6:7; the covenant with Noah in Genesis 6, 9; the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, 17; the covenant through Moses primarily in Exodus 19–24; the covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalms 89, 132; and the final covenant in Christ in places like Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 12:23-29. These covenants were never at odds with each other. Rather, they successively administered and governed God's kingdom as it grew throughout history.

From the very beginning, God's relationship with humanity has been governed by covenant. The covenantal nature of God's relationship to his people continued throughout the Old Testament in the history of Israel. And even the Christian faith of the New Testament is explained in terms of the new covenant in Christ.

Understanding that God has always administered his kingdom through covenants is very important for Christian ethics. To put it in terms of our lessons: biblical covenants indicate the facts of our situation — that God is our king and that we are his kingdom servants. They establish the kinds of kingdom goals God blesses. And they delineate many of the means we are to use to achieve the goals that he blesses. In short, our covenant relationship with God helps us understand how each aspect of our lives should work to bring glory to our great king.

Now that we've explored the circumstances of the kingdom of God in regard to the kingdom's importance and its components, we should turn briefly to the kingdom's development throughout history.

DEVELOPMENT

It's been a longstanding Christian tradition to summarize the Bible's story in terms of three historical phases: First, creation, when God created the universe and everything in it. Second, the Fall, when Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden. And third, redemption, when God made a way to save humanity from the curse of sin and death.

One of the great themes of Scripture, uniting the whole of it from start to finish, is that God is establishing a kingdom and presiding over human beings as King and Lord. We see that already at the creation when God sets apart Adam and Eve, places them in the garden, calls them to tend it in obedience to him. And we learn from Genesis 3, as God is walking in cool of the day, that God was present there in fellowship. And there you get a glimpse into the distinctive character

of God's kingdom. He's not distant and remote, he is present with his own. Of course, what happens at the Fall is that our first parents listened to the voice of the serpent rather than to the voice of God... And Adam is exiled from Paradise. But the good news is that God gets to work right away establishing a kingdom in this world. This kingdom will be made of sinners who are redeemed. And the presiding king will be the promised seed of Genesis 3, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's our great hope and our great confidence as we await Jesus' return at the end of the age.

— Dr Guy Waters

We'll address these three phases of the kingdom's development in historical order, but we'll use different names to highlight our kingdom emphasis. We'll speak of the phase of creation as the time when the kingdom was in a state of initial peace. We'll refer to humanity's fall into sin as humanity's rebellion against the divine king. And we'll speak of the phase of redemption as a time of final peace as God brings his kingdom to its glorious fulfillment. Let's turn our attention first to the period of initial peace.

Initial Peace

In the beginning, when God created the world, humanity lived in perfect harmony with God. Adam and Eve were obedient servants, and as a result, there was peace between God and humanity. As we've seen, during this period, God appointed human beings to serve as his vassal kings. And at first, humanity fulfilled this role well. They were in perfect accord with their obligations toward God. As a result, Adam and Eve were blessed with close fellowship with God and continued to live in the Garden of Eden where life was blissful and easy. In fact, the rest of Scripture often looks back to this garden setting as a time of great peace and prosperity. For example, in Isaiah 51:3, we read these words:

The Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song (Isaiah 51:3).

During the time of peace in the Garden of Eden, human life was full of joy and gladness, thanksgiving and singing. In this initial period, the rest of the world was undeveloped. But in the garden, where human society existed, there was great peace.

We read in Genesis 3 that this was a world in which work and childbearing were relatively easy and full of joy. No enemy threatened war. No animals threatened violence. No sickness threatened health. No drought or flood or fire threatened to destroy homes and crops. But rather, God cared tenderly for Adam and Eve, and even walked and met with them in the cool of the garden.

In short, this was a world in which all the components of the covenant worked properly to favor humanity. God, the great king, had shown incredible goodwill toward his people by creating them, placing them in an idyllic garden, and giving them authority over all creation. With regard to human obligations, the Lord required them to serve him and to obey him. And they did so without flaw. And with regard to consequences, humanity's obedience resulted in great blessings from God. This was the way God created the world for humanity, and this is still the way the world is meant to be.

Sadly, the development of God's kingdom goes beyond this period of initial peace to a time of rebellion against God — a time when humanity broke their covenantal obligations to the great King and mutinied against him.

Rebellion

We all know the story of humanity's initial rebellion against God. In Genesis 3, the serpent tempted Eve to eat from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and Eve gave in to the temptation. She also gave some of the fruit to Adam, and he ate it, too. By sinning in this way, humanity violated one of their covenant obligations. And as a result, they received the covenant curses. God threw Adam and Eve out of the garden. And he forced them to live in a world where the ground was hard to work, where childbirth was painful, and where sickness and famine and wild animals and war threatened them and their children. They were still bound by the covenant obligations, but after their rebellion, they experienced the negative consequences of failing in these obligations.

The consequences of humanity's fall into sin extend, in a first place, to destruction of relationships and capacities that humanity was built with. So, in relationship with God, there is loss of that; there is separation, and that leads to the unraveling of everything else the human is supposed to do and the connections that humans are supposed to have to each other and to the environment. So, right away, with Adam and Eve, it shows, and then, as the human race unravels, you have people murdering each other very quickly. In relationship to the created world, you've got chaos in creation where you have now storms and animals destroying each other. Everything is now hostile to life because humanity was supposed to order creation under God's rule, to live in ways that is for well-being. But now, having misled creation, cut off from God, everything is kind of off the tracks, and now things are destroying, and self-destruction is just working itself out through all the extension of creation.

— Dr. John E. McKinley

Sadly, this rebellion has characterized the world throughout history. Humanity has continued to rebel against the great King, and God has continued to punish humanity with covenant curses. He destroyed the whole world with a flood in Noah's day. He allowed

disease and nature and war to ravage humanity in every generation. And, throughout it all, humanity has not learned its lesson. Instead of turning to God in repentance and keeping our covenant obligations, we continue to rebel and perpetuate the covenant curses. But mercifully, God did not abandon us to rebellion and curse.

In God's great kindness, after we had broken the initial peace with our rebellion, God determined to bring final peace to his kingdom, to return blessings to his people.

Final Peace

In small ways, God began to restore peace to his kingdom immediately after humanity's fall into sin. As we see in Genesis 3, God did not immediately strike Adam and Eve dead when they sinned. Instead, he allowed them to live. And, in the midst of cursing them, he presented the first offer of the gospel to them. Listen to God's words to the serpent in Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15, NIV).

Here, God explained that the offspring of the woman would crush the serpent's head. Theologians commonly call this the *proto-euangelion*, or "first gospel," because it was the first time in history that God offered to send a redeemer to rescue humanity from the curse of sin.

In this sense, throughout the history of the world after the Fall, God was working toward the goal of the full redemption and success of his kingdom. The Old Testament tells us that the gospel of salvation was already in operation, reconciling some people to God, and establishing peace between God and his redeemed people. But even though God always maintained a people who were faithful to him in the Old Testament, he did not restore his kingdom to the glory it had displayed in the days of initial peace.

During the earthly ministry of Christ, the restoration of peace took a huge leap forward as the kingdom reached the last stages of its fulfillment. Jesus was the Redeemer toward whom the entire Old Testament pointed. He came to earth as God's anointed one, the vassal king, to reestablish a faithful kingdom on earth and to spread God's heavenly kingdom over the whole world. He is continuing that work now. And when he comes again in glory, Jesus will complete the restoration of the kingdom, bringing the whole world into glorious final peace with our divine king.

Now that we've explored the circumstances of God's kingdom, we're ready to turn to our second major topic: life in the kingdom of God. Here, we'll focus on the twofold goal God has assigned to us within his kingdom.

LIFE

Earlier in this lesson we showed that the most important ethical goal for us to pursue is the glory of God through the triumph of his kingdom. At this point, we'll consider some practical implications of this goal, especially as it pertains to our lives as citizens of God's kingdom. In particular, we'll be looking for answers to the question: What kinds of goals are we to pursue as we seek God's kingdom? The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* offers significant guidance for our goals in life in its first question and answer. In response to the question:

What is the chief end of man?

The catechism answers:

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

You'll notice that the catechism describes a twofold goal. On the one hand, it says that we are to pursue the glory of God. And on the other hand, we are to pursue the enjoyment of God forever.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism speaks to the whole idea of why God created humanity to begin with. And so, if we understand this clearly, it speaks to the fact that we have a relationship with God in Christ and how we are to respond to that relationship being in Christ as well. And so, the first answer to this catechism question, that we're created that we may glorify God, the apostle Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 10:31, where he says to the Corinthians, whatever you do, whether word or deed, anything in your life, do it all to the glory of God... Secondly, the catechism answer says or responds that we are to also enjoy our relationship with the Lord, that we may enjoy him forever. So, this speaks not only to the fact that we are given the opportunity, the great pleasure of being in relationship with the Holy God and enjoying his very glory as part of our relationship with him, but he also enjoys relationship with us and makes that possible through our relationship with Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Jay Haley

Our discussion of the twofold goal of life in God's kingdom will follow the same division. First, we'll consider what it means to glorify God as our divine king. And second, we'll talk about what it means to enjoy God in his kingdom. Let's begin with the goal of glorifying God.

GLORIFY GOD

In this section, we'll explore the idea that we glorify God primarily through the triumph of his kingdom. We'll do this first by defining the glory of God, and second by considering what the glorification of God looks like in our lives. Let's begin with what the glory of God is.

Glory of God

Scripture uses the word “glory” — *kavod* (כְּבוֹד) in Hebrew and *doxa* (δόξα) in Greek — to say several different things about God. Very often, God's “glory” is his appearance, especially the cloud of light that surrounds him, as in Exodus 24:17 or Ezekiel 10:4. But when we speak of the glory of God as the goal of *ethics*, we're not thinking primarily in terms of his appearance. Rather, we're more concerned with God's fame and reputation, especially the fame he receives through his powerful works. For instance, in Exodus 14:4, God spoke these words:

I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord (Exodus 14:4).

In this passage, God indicated that the recognition of his glory — that is, his fame and reputation — would increase when the Egyptians saw that his power had defeated them. They would resent his glory, but they would still have to acknowledge it.

The Bible seems very concerned with the idea of God's fame spreading throughout the world. And that could perhaps seem to us a rather self-indulgent thing on the part of God. In fact, it's rooted in the original purposes of creation. When God created Adam and Eve, he gave them a mandate. He told them to go forth and multiply. When you think about what Adam and Eve were, they were the image bearers of God. What the Lord is saying there is, “Go forth, multiply, spread little images of me,” if you like, “all over the face of the earth.” The idea was that Adam was to tend and cultivate the garden, bring order to Eden, and spread image bearers across the face of the earth, and thereby demonstrate that what was true was publicly true, that God was sovereign, that this was his creation, and he ruled over it in wonder and glory.

— Dr. Carl R. Trueman

Of course, in ethics, God's glory isn't simply about his fame and reputation. It's also about the honor and praise given to him in response to his supreme kingship. Unlike the Egyptians who resented God's glorious works of power, God's faithful people are to *appreciate* God's power. And we are to increase his fame and reputation by proclaiming

his deeds and giving him thanks. For instance, in Psalm 29:1-2, David regarded God's glory in terms of honor and praise when he wrote these words:

Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness (Psalm 29:1-2).

And listen to the words of Revelation 4:9-11:

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Revelation 4:9-11).

Three times in this short passage we are told that God receives this worship while seated on his royal throne. And this is the consistent picture throughout Scripture.

Now that we've seen what the glory of God is, and how it relates to his kingship, we should turn to the glorification of God. In this section, we'll be asking questions like: Why is God's glory our goal? And how can we increase our divine king's glory?

Glorification of God

Most fundamentally, human beings are obligated to glorify God because he is our king. And as our king, he has the right to demand our praise and worship. As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* indicates in its first question and answer, humanity's fundamental purpose is to increase the glory of God. And one of the best places to see this in Scripture is in the creation account where God specifically stated his purpose for creating humanity. Listen to the words of Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image ... and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image ... God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:26-28).

When God created humanity, he assigned us a purpose. And that purpose was to rule over the earth as his vassal kings and priests, spreading his rule and kingdom blessings in service to him throughout the whole world. And under the vassal kingship of Christ, this is still our purpose. We are to improve the world, increasing God's rule and blessings. And we are to multiply citizens within his kingdom, teaching them to

acknowledge, honor and praise our great suzerain king. And as we fulfill this purpose, God's worthiness, fame and reputation increase. And in this way, his glory increases as well.

We see this emphasis on God's glory repeated in many ways throughout Scripture. For example, the Psalms teach us to meditate on God's good works and power, which increases his reputation. And they teach us to sing about these things, which is a form of honoring and praising him. The historical books record many of God's works and power, mercy and judgment. Through their records, they teach us to remember God's goodness and sovereignty, and they give us further reasons to praise him. The prophetic books, in turn, teach us to hope in God's future glory. And this hope is to be our motivation to pursue righteousness in this life. Moreover, in God's law, obedience to all of God's commandments is actually equated with reverence for his glory. Listen to the way Moses spoke of the law in Deuteronomy 28:58:

Do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 28:58).

Essentially, Moses listed only one command here. But he described it in two ways. Simply put, fearing God's glorious and awesome name is the same thing as carefully doing all the words of his law. And this is because when we have a proper reverence for God and his glory, we express that reverence in obedience to all his commands. Jesus taught this same idea in Matthew 22:37-40. Listen to his words there:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 to teach that the commandment to love God is the foundation of all the other commandments. And, of course, loving God includes recognizing and affirming his worthiness, as well as appreciating and honoring him. In short, loving God is one important way of glorifying him.

Now, as important as it is for life in God's kingdom to keep our hearts set on the goal of glorifying God, we are also to enjoy God forever.

ENJOY GOD

We can enjoy God in a number of ways. First and foremost, we can enjoy the fact that we can have communion and fellowship with the holy God, which is an awesome thing. I think of Adam and Eve enjoying communion fellowship with the Lord in the cool of the day as revealed in Genesis. In addition to that, we can enjoy God by enjoying his creation. We look at creation, and we see the beauty of creation, and it was done in such a way that we could obviously enjoy it... We

can enjoy the relationships of family, of friends, of neighbors, and that is another way to enjoy God and to appreciate and thank him for relationships, if you will. We can enjoy him in terms of exercising the gifts and abilities that he has given us, just greatly appreciative and thankful for his gifting of us and to use those gifts and abilities in a way that will ultimately be a blessing.

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Now, when we speak of our own enjoyment as one of the primary goals of biblical ethics, some Christians are a bit surprised. After all, our standard for ethical living is supposed to be the character of God, not our own wants and desires. So, how are we to reconcile our own desire for happiness with God's desire for a world that glorifies him and magnifies his kingship? Well, not surprisingly, the answer is that proper human enjoyment brings glory to God.

We'll explore how enjoying God actually brings God glory, first by considering the role of humanity in God's kingdom. And second, by looking at the role of the law that God gave to rule his kingdom. Let's begin by looking at God's purpose for humanity as a means of bringing glory to the divine King.

Role of Humanity

When God created the world, humanity's role was to populate and rule over God's kingdom. But God didn't simply want citizens who would serve him. God is a loving king. He is good and gracious and benevolent to us. And he wants us to love him. His ideal kingdom is not one in which we cower in fear of him and obey so that we can avoid punishment. Rather, in God's ideal kingdom everyone loves the Lord and shares fellowship with him and with his people. Consider Romans 14:17 where Paul made the following point:

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

The people of God's kingdom should be characterized by joy and peace. In other words, they should enjoy the blessings that God provides. And listen to what Jesus taught in Matthew 13:44:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Matthew 13:44).

God's kingdom is a cause for great joy. And the proper human response to the blessings of God's kingdom is happiness and enjoyment.

It's worth noting that Jesus gave this teaching in the context of explaining the coming day of God's judgment. On that day, those who are faithful to God will inherit tremendous glory — glory that far surpasses any price we may pay in this life. And

because of this coming glory, we should rejoice in our present participation in the kingdom, knowing that we are laying up treasures in heaven.

As we've just said, properly enjoying God brings him glory because of humanity's role in his kingdom. Now, we should turn to the role of the law and how the rules of God's kingdom are designed and intended to bring us joy.

Role of the Law

God's law is the revealed standard by which he governs his kingdom, and we are obligated to live by it. And when we live according to the law, we receive the blessings God has intended for the obedient citizens of his kingdom. So, we can say that one role of the law is to instruct us to live in ways that lead to blessings and enjoyment. Now, of course, if we use the law wrongly, then we ask the law to fulfill a role that God never intended for it. And that can lead to terrible consequences. For instance, if we try to gain salvation by keeping the law, the law will condemn us to death. This was Paul's point in Galatians 3:10, where he commented on the law with these words:

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them" (Galatians 3:10).

The law is a curse when we use it wrongly, such as when we try to earn salvation by our own good works, rather than through the merit of Christ. On several occasions, the Bible speaks in harshly negative terms about the misuse of the law.

Still, far more frequently, the Bible speaks of the proper use of God's law as a great blessing to humanity. And this shouldn't surprise us. After all, the law reveals God to us, teaching us how to please him and how to obtain his blessings. In fact, Scripture commonly speaks of God's law as a delight, as in Psalm 1:2, and as a gracious gift, as in Psalm 119:29. And it teaches that keeping the law results in the covenant blessings of God's kingdom, as in Deuteronomy 28:1-14. In short, the law was given for our good, for our prosperity, and for our joy.

The law is a blessing to God's people. It reveals God to them. It tells them what he requires of them. It warns them of how they can, how they *will* displease him. And in many ways, it prophesies the future of their history, and it points forward to the glorious eschatological restoration that God will accomplish on behalf of his people.

— Dr. James M. Hamilton

David summarized this view of the law in Psalm 19:7-8, where he wrote these words:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul... the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart (Psalm 19:7-8).

God has given us rules to follow in order to produce joy in our lives. And those rules are his law. So, when we obey God's law, we enjoy him, and we glorify him at the same time. We enjoy him because he blesses our obedience, and because it pleases us to bring pleasure to the God we love. And our godly joy brings glory to God by fulfilling his purpose, by acknowledging his worth, and by expressing thanks toward him. In all of these ways, the role of the law shows us that enjoying God is an important part of God's goal for humanity.

Now of course, in our present world, our enjoyment of God is often hindered by our suffering. But we need to remember that in God's plan for us, our suffering is actually a means to our further enjoyment of God. Passages like Romans 5:3-5, James 1:2-4, and 1 Peter 4:13, teach us that God uses suffering in the same way that a refiner uses fire to burn off the impurities of precious metals. In God's hands, our suffering is a tool that proves our faith and brings us to spiritual maturity, and that ultimately results in our joy.

Redeemed humanity has always had the twofold goal of glorifying God and enjoying him forever. As we work to build God's kingdom on earth by obeying his commands and spreading his blessings, we glorify God as the divine king. But glorifying God isn't just an obligation. It also brings us joy. Ultimately, our experience of joy is a critical element in God's plan for his kingdom. And our joy brings great glory to our divine king.

So far in this lesson, we've investigated the circumstances of the kingdom of God, as well as life in God's kingdom. At this point, we're ready to turn our attention to our last main topic: the program for the kingdom of God. In this section, we'll focus on God's specific goals for the church as it builds God's kingdom.

PROGRAM

In every age, God's plan has been to establish his kingdom throughout the whole world by populating it with loyal and righteous citizens who turn it into paradise for his glorious presence. But it's always important to remember that, throughout history, the *situation* of God's kingdom has changed again and again. During various stages in the development of the kingdom, God's people have lived in different places and faced different challenges. Sometimes they've been at peace; other times at war. Sometimes they've enjoyed plenty; other times they've suffered loss. But in every age, God has given rather specific goals to tell his people how to accomplish his overarching goal.

As we consider God's program for the kingdom, we'll look at two instructions God gave his people at critical stages in history. First, we'll consider the cultural mandate that God gave to Adam and Eve when he created the world. And second, we'll look at the Great Commission that Jesus assigned to the church after his resurrection. The relationship between these two often confuses Christ's followers. So, let's turn first to the cultural mandate.

CULTURAL MANDATE

We'll explore three facets of the cultural mandate: First, we'll offer a definition of the cultural mandate. Second, we'll discuss the relationship between the cultural mandate and the creation ordinances of marriage and labor. And third, we'll look at the different applications of the cultural mandate throughout the historical development of God's kingdom. Let's begin by defining what we mean when we speak of the cultural mandate.

Definition

In simple terms, the expression "cultural mandate" refers to:

God's command that human beings expand his kingdom to the ends of the earth through the development of human culture

As we saw earlier in this lesson, when God created the world, he commanded humanity to fill and subdue the earth. Listen again to God's command in Genesis 1:28:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Genesis 1:28).

We've already discussed this command in terms of our obligation to spread God's kingdom throughout the world. But theologians also refer to this as the *cultural* mandate because being fruitful and multiplying, filling, subduing and having dominion over the earth involves building human cultures.

You'll recall that when God created the world, the Garden of Eden was the only area that he turned into a perfect habitation for humanity. It was also the only place perfected enough for God to be present in his glory with humanity. Humanity's job was to improve and populate the rest of the world, expanding the community of God's people and making the whole world fit for God's glorious kingdom presence.

In this sense, the cultural mandate is the command to establish righteous, God-honoring human populations and societies. And it includes making improvements to the world that accompany these societies. In the beginning, the focus of the cultural mandate was on populating an unpopulated world, and building new societies, and turning the wild fields and wastelands of the world into beautiful, productive, life-giving gardens for the glory of God.

God gave the cultural mandate to Adam and Eve at the very beginning. He told them to multiply, to increase, to fill the earth, and he also asked them to subdue the earth and to rule over it... And most theologians see that as a mandate to explore, to advance life, to make life better and more useful to humanity, to use the resources of the earth — not to abuse it but to use it — to serve the interests of

humanity and, of course, for the glory of God. So, the cultural mandate encourages us to explore, to study, to make scientific advances in order to better human life.

— Rev. Dr. Emad A. Mikhail

Now that we've seen a basic definition of the cultural mandate, we're ready to address our second topic: the creation ordinances of marriage and labor, which represent some of the central concerns of the cultural mandate.

Creation Ordinances

God conveys his commands to us in many ways. Most of the commands recorded in Scripture are verbal. That is, they're conveyed with words. And sometimes God reveals his commands to us through natural means, such as through nature and other human beings. But God's commands also are revealed through his acts of creation. A "creation ordinance" is a command or requirement that God established when he first made the heavens and the earth. The idea is that God, in his first acts of creation, created the world and human beings perfectly, without the corruption of sin. So, the standards he determined for Adam and Eve before the Fall, remain the ideal standards for human behavior and morality today.

Genesis 1:28 teaches us that God gave the cultural mandate to humanity when he created them, commanding them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it and to have dominion over it. Some of the same things that God spoke in the cultural mandate, he also revealed through the creation ordinances of marriage and labor. For instance, the creation ordinance of marriage is based on the purpose for which God created two genders, male and female.

Marriage. We're all familiar with the basic elements of the marriage between Adam and Eve. First, God created Adam. Then God made Eve from Adam's rib. And finally, God presented Eve to Adam, and they became husband and wife. But listen to Genesis 2:24 and the way Moses commented on the marriage between Adam and Eve:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

Here, Moses indicated that God created both male and female human beings for the purpose of marriage; one man with one woman.

God's purposes in creation are expressions of God's character. As a result, they're normative throughout history. We see from the beginning that God created humanity in two genders for the purpose of marriage. So, we must conclude that marriage should be a union between one man and one woman. This doesn't mean that every individual is required to marry. But it does mean that the human race should perpetuate the godly institution of marriage.

And the creation ordinance of marriage directly relates to the cultural mandate's command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Simply put, Scripture instructs that children are to be born within marriage. Therefore, marriage should be a prerequisite for the multiplication of human beings.

Labor. Similarly, there's a creation ordinance directly commanding us to labor to expand God's kingdom throughout the earth. Listen to these details from Genesis 2:15, 18:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it... the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:15, 18).

Adam, the first man, was created to labor in God's garden. And his wife, Eve, was created to help him with this task. So, when we read that God's purpose for humanity is that we labor on his behalf, we must conclude that the human race is *morally obligated* to labor on God's behalf. And this creation ordinance of labor directly relates to the cultural mandate's command to fill and subdue the earth and have dominion over it. That is, we are to establish human societies throughout the world to the glory of God. After all, it was through effort and labor that humanity was to tend God's garden. So, certainly expanding this endeavor to include the whole earth would require substantial labor as well.

As we've said throughout this lesson, building God's kingdom is the goal of humanity. And the creation ordinances of marriage and labor show us two of the most basic ways God has commanded us to work toward that goal. As a result, the church must always affirm and engage in marriage and labor. And when we do so, we will expand God's kingdom on earth, and bring him honor and glory.

Now that we've explained the cultural mandate and its relationship to the creation ordinances of marriage and labor, we're ready to turn to its various applications in the different historical periods of the kingdom of God.

Applications

As we've seen, the cultural mandate was given at creation, before humanity's fall into sin. At that time, God was at peace with the human race. And because there was no sin within human society, the goal of the cultural mandate was simple. People were to expand and develop God's kingdom, especially by multiplying citizens within the kingdom and reordering the natural world to form human societies. In this sense, the cultural mandate originally was given in relatively uncomplicated circumstances. There was no need for human redemption or restoration. Human beings were to create more people through marriage and to create ordered societies through labor.

But with humanity's fall into sin, human culture was corrupted, and God cursed humanity because of sin. Among other things, this corruption and curse applied specifically to marriage and to labor. In Genesis 3:16 God placed this curse on Eve:

I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing ... Your desire shall be

contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you (Genesis 3:16).

Notice that Eve's curse applied both to reproduction, which would now be extremely painful for her, and to marriage, which would now involve struggles and conflicts. And in verses 17-19, God cursed Adam with these words:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life ... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread (Genesis 3:17-19).

Prior to this curse, the ground easily yielded to humanity's labor. But by this curse, it became far more difficult for humanity to meet their obligation to subdue the earth and to spread God's kingdom geographically.

Humanity has continued in sin throughout history, so that no human society properly manifests God's kingdom on earth. But the cultural mandate still obligates us to spread God's kingdom to the ends of the earth. So, how are we to understand the cultural mandate in light of the world's corruption? The answer is that the cultural mandate now has an expanded application. As we've said, the goal of the cultural mandate is to turn the entire world into God's kingdom on earth, fit for his habitation among his people. Before the Fall, this was to be accomplished simply by building new societies and cultures. But now the task is harder. Not only do we need to subdue and fill the earth with God's faithful people. We also need to restore and redeem fallen human societies by purging sin from our cultures. And, in fact, the Bible makes this emphasis on restoration and redemption clear immediately after humanity's fall into sin. As you'll recall, when God cursed the serpent in the Garden of Eden, he also gave redemptive hope to the human race. Listen again to what God said to the serpent in Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Genesis 3:15, NIV).

In the midst of dispensing curses for sin after the Fall, God presented the *proto-gospel*, the "first gospel." Here, he indicated that he would not abandon his creation to sin and curse but would redeem it through Eve's offspring.

Marriage and reproduction, as painful and conflicted as they had become, eventually would produce the Savior of the world. And labor, even though it was extremely difficult, would sustain the human race long enough to produce the coming Redeemer. And this pattern was to continue throughout history, eventually resulting in the restoration of the whole world.

For instance, in Genesis 9, after the flood of Noah's day, God repeated the command to fill the earth. And he promised to sustain the world so that the human race could subdue it once again. Notice that, as God applied the cultural mandate and creation ordinances to the world in Noah's day, it was a restorative and redemptive work. God had just destroyed the entire sinful world, and now it was up to Noah to rebuild it. He was to replace the destroyed sinful cultures with righteous, godly ones, and to repopulate the earth with human beings that would obey and honor the Lord.

Similarly, in Genesis 15, 17 and 22, God promised that Abraham would have innumerable descendants, and they would inherit not only the Promised Land but eventually the whole earth. And there was also a redemptive aspect here. Abraham was to overtake the existing pagan cultures in the Promised Land and replace them with God's kingdom. And ultimately, his descendants were to spread this conquest across the world.

What was true for Noah and Abraham continued to be true throughout the Bible. For instance, in Deuteronomy 28, God confirmed these same Abrahamic promises in the days of Moses. And in Psalm 89, they were confirmed again to David and his descendants.

Even more, as we read in Revelation 11:15, Jesus will eventually rule over the entire earth, extending God's kingdom to every corner. And Hebrews 10:12-14 indicates that when Jesus does this, he will perfect both the world and the human race by destroying his enemies and completely redeeming and restoring believers. Moreover, Ephesians 5:25-27 teaches us that when Christ comes into his kingdom, he will be married to the church. And according to Hebrews 2:13 Christ will have many children, because every believer is his child.

As we have seen, the cultural mandate expresses God's program for his kingdom. But since the Fall, the outworking of this program involves a long and difficult process of redemption and restoration. Nevertheless, through things like marriage and labor, God is still using humanity to fulfill the cultural mandate. Of course, his kingdom will not be completed until Christ returns in glory. But when that day comes, the whole world will be turned into the paradise God has always intended.

Now that we have a basic understanding of the cultural mandate in mind, we're ready to see what role the Great Commission plays in God's program for his kingdom.

GREAT COMMISSION

Our discussion of the Great Commission will divide into three parts. First, we'll offer a definition of the Great Commission. Second, we'll explain the implications of the Great Commission. And third, we'll explore the relationship between the Great Commission and the cultural mandate. Let's begin with the definition of the Great Commission.

Definition

The Great Commission is:

Christ's appointment of the eleven faithful apostles as his authoritative representatives and his charge to them to spread the kingdom of God throughout the whole world

This commission is commonly called “great” because it explains the overriding mission not only of the apostles, but also of the church they built. We find the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20, where the Lord said these words to the eleven:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

The Great Commission contains three essential elements: First, Jesus’ statement that he possessed the authority to build his kingdom and to commission the apostles to do the work. Second, Jesus’ charge to the apostles instructing and authorizing them to build his kingdom. And third, Jesus’ assurance that he would empower and protect the apostles in this endeavor.

Even though the Great Commission was delivered directly to the apostles, the Great Commission also binds the church to continue their work. After all, Jesus commissioned the apostles to make disciples of all nations — a job clearly too big to be done by only a few men. He also spoke of being with them “to the end of the age,” indicating that he would see this work through to its completion at his return. These details indicate that Jesus always intended the apostles to carry out the Great Commission by establishing a church to carry on with their work.

Now that we’ve defined the Great Commission, we should turn our attention to its implications. In this section, we’ll consider the responsibilities the church has in light of the Great Commission.

Implications

Simply stated, the church’s responsibility is to continue the kingdom program that the apostles started. These responsibilities are summarized in the second essential element of the Great Commission: the charge to the apostles. This charge, in Matthew 28:19-20, consists of the following instructions:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus’ instruction was not just to disciple people from every nation, but to expand the kingdom of God to include the nations themselves. In other words, he was looking for a geographical expansion as well as a numerical expansion.

It’s the church’s job to evangelize everyone in the world. God’s people are to bring believers and their families into the church, to baptize them, and to teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded. Throughout every generation, we must work to bring the whole world into God’s kingdom.

The Great Commission, as recorded at the end of Matthew’s gospel, is to go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, teaching men and women to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. And there is a thrust out into all nations with the unique message of Jesus Christ, and the challenge to not just make converts but to make faithful disciples and followers of him. And the church continues in that role even now, to make sure that all unreached places have the opportunity to hear the good news about Jesus Christ and thus continue that commission.

— Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

Having defined the Great Commission and introduced its implications for the church, we are ready to turn to our final topic: the relationship between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

Cultural Mandate

We’ll consider three aspects of the relationship between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission: the similarities between them, the differences between them, and the priorities we should place on each. First, let’s explore the similarities between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

Similarities. The similarities between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission are far reaching. Both obligate humanity to build God’s kingdom, and even to make this our primary goal in life. As part of this kingdom-building, both require us to fill the earth with citizens of God’s kingdom, whether by childbirth within marriage or by evangelism. And both require us to subdue the earth, whether by building societies or by discipling nations. These similarities alert us to an important fact: The Great Commission did not replace the cultural mandate. Rather, the Great Commission is Christ’s application of the cultural mandate until he returns. Since Christ’s earthly ministry, the Great Commission has been, and continues to be, an important way in which the church is to apply the cultural mandate.

In addition to these similarities, there are also some differences between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission that we should consider.

Differences. One important difference between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission is that the cultural mandate is for every age. It sets forth basic norms for God’s people that Scripture applied in different ways at different times. The Great Commission, on the other hand, is for the church age. It focuses specifically on the situation facing God’s people after Christ’s earthly ministry and prior to his glorious return.

In addition, the cultural mandate was given at creation before sin had corrupted humanity. So, from the beginning, it’s been humanity’s job to turn the world into a paradise fit for God’s habitation. By contrast, the Great Commission was given after

Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It came at the beginning of the new creation in Christ, after everything God had already accomplished in Old Testament history and in Jesus' earthly ministry. So, whereas the cultural mandate is our *fundamental* responsibility, the Great Commission is the primary *application* of that responsibility to the specific circumstances in which we now live.

Another important difference is that, relative to one another, the cultural mandate is a very broad commandment that entails every aspect of human responsibility. But the Great Commission is a narrow commandment that focuses only on *some* of the responsibilities of Christ's followers. For instance, the cultural mandate requires humanity to marry and bear physical children in order to produce more human beings for God's kingdom. And, because sin entered the world, it also requires God's people to lead their children and others into loyal service to God. By contrast, the Great Commission emphasizes only the need to increase the number of God's servants by making disciples.

Something similar is true of labor. The cultural mandate aims at establishing God's kingdom throughout the world by requiring us to labor to make disciples and build human societies that honor God. By contrast, the Great Commission requires us to labor only to make disciples and build the *church*. Although other portions of the New Testament call on us to impact human cultures as salt and light, they don't include a specific requirement to build human societies.

The Great Commission is the core of the church's mission, and so the cultural mandate becomes both the necessary prelude to entering this core and the consequence of having it. Both the work before and after evangelism are part of the cultural mandate... We must do the work of the gospel, but what happens after people are saved because of this work? They come to understand a new culture, better music, better art, and better morals. So, these people must carry out the cultural mandate as they become thoroughly equipped. They are not simply to receive the gospel and wait to go to heaven as clueless people. Rather, they should be light and salt in ethics, in literature, in knowledge, in education, in medicine, and in all aspects of life. The level and scope of the Great Commission and the cultural mandate may be different, but ... the essence is the same: we are to expand the kingdom of God so that all tongues, nations, tribes, and people will return to God.

— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong translation

Finally, having looked at the similarities and differences between the cultural mandate and the Great Commission, we should turn to the matter of priorities.

Priorities. Very often in the history of the church, Christians have disagreed over which of God's great mandates has priority over the other. Some have argued that Christians should concentrate their lives on the requirements of the cultural mandate by engaging in marriage, procreation and labor as they build human culture. Others have argued that these requirements have been superseded by the gospel mandate of making disciples through evangelism and teaching. This tension has very important practical

significance for each one of us. Should we concentrate in one direction or the other? Should building human culture take precedence over gospel ministry? Or should gospel ministry have priority?

As we've already said, the cultural mandate came first and expresses the ultimate goal of humanity — namely, the complete triumph of the kingdom of God throughout the entire world. So, in this way, it has priority. However, from the moment Christ gave the Great Commission, his followers have used it as a means to fulfill the cultural mandate. We still have children and build societies, but fulfilling the cultural mandate through the Great Commission is critical to our age. One of our top priorities must be to rescue people from the power of sin through the proclamation of the gospel as we wait for Christ to return in glory.

From this perspective, we shouldn't view the cultural mandate and the Great Commission as being in opposition. One is simply the application of the other until Christ returns. But the process of application is complex. As we've said many times in these lessons, obedience to God's commands must always consider the persons involved and the situations they face. Obedience in one situation may look very different from obedience in another situation. Listen to the apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:15-23, where he spoke of giving up his right to marry and to be paid for his labor so that he could advance the gospel:

I have made no use of any of these rights ... I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:15-23).

Now, not everyone is called to forgo marriage and payment for their work in order to advance the gospel, but advancing the gospel must still be a priority in our lives.

The cultural mandate reveals God's overarching program for his kingdom. His ultimate goal is to spread his kingdom throughout all of creation and to populate his kingdom with faithful citizens. And he established creation ordinances such as marriage and labor as a means of accomplishing this goal. Unfortunately, humanity's fall into sin made this goal impossible for us to fulfill ourselves. So, God is redeeming and restoring the human race. And the primary means he's provided for this redemption and restoration are the very things he commanded in the Great Commission — evangelism and teaching every nation on earth to live in every area of life according to all that Jesus commanded.

As God's people, we have good news to proclaim. The gospel message that we bring to this world is that Christ himself has overcome evil, sin and death. He now rules until all of his enemies are under his feet. And when he returns, he will fill the earth with redeemed images of God and have dominion over the whole world to the glory of God. As the Great Commission instructs, we proclaim and teach this good news to men and women everywhere. And we do this so they, and we, may believe in Christ, spread his kingdom in this life, and reign with him in the new creation, the glorious kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've seen that the kingdom of God is the ultimate goal of Christian ethics. We've considered the circumstances of the kingdom, including its importance, its components and its development. We've discussed life in the kingdom, looking at our twofold chief end. And we've seen the program for the kingdom as it's stated both in the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

The success of the kingdom is God's ultimate goal for his creation. And therefore, it should be our ultimate goal, too. In fact, every one of our thoughts, words and deeds must serve the building of God's kingdom in some way. Insofar as they do, God approves and blesses them, so that they can rightly be called ethically good. And insofar as they detract from the goal of the kingdom, God condemns them, so that they are rightly called evil. Whenever we set out to make ethical judgments, we must account for the ways our decisions will impact the kingdom of God.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. John Frame (Host) is Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary. He began his teaching career at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and later became a founding faculty member at Westminster Seminary California, where he taught for more than 20 years. He is also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Dr. Frame received both his Master of Arts and Master of Philosophy degrees from Yale University and his Doctor of Divinity degree from Belhaven College. A prolific writer, Dr. Frame has authored numerous books and articles, including *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (P&R, 2013) and *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (P&R, 2015). His book, *The Doctrine of God* (P&R, 2002) won the 2003 Gold Medallion Award from the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. He has also contributed to several theological reference volumes, such as the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (IVP, 2006).

Rev. Larry Cockrell is Senior Pastor of Household of Faith Church and faculty member of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. David Correa is an associate Professor at San Pablo Theological Seminary in Merida, Mexico and the Director of Next Institute Mexico. He also serves as Pastor of Presbyterian Iglesia Jesus in Progreso.

Dr. Saul Cruz (1954-2014) was the founder of Armonía Ministries in Mexico City.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

Dr. Jay Haley is Adjunct Professor at Birmingham Theological Seminary.

Dr. James M. Hamilton is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Preaching Pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church.

Dr. John E. McKinley is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Talbot School of Theology.

Rev. Dr. Emad A. Mikhail is President of Great Commission College in Egypt.

Dr. Robert A. Peterson is Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary.

Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong is a renowned Chinese evangelist and theologian, promoter of Reformed Evangelistic Movement, and the founder of the Stephen Tong Evangelistic Ministries International (STEMI) and Reformed Evangelical Church and Seminary in Indonesia.

Dr. Carl R. Trueman is Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Grove City College and formerly served on the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania.

Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert is Senior Pastor of Christ Church Virginia Water, England, and the former Vice Principal and Director of the School of Preaching at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

Dr. Guy Waters is the James M. Baird, Jr. Professor of New Testament and Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary.

GLOSSARY

Beatitudes – Jesus’ statements in Matthew 5:3-12 that each begin with the phrase "Blessed are"

Christian ethics – Theology viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not

covenant – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

creation ordinances – Moral requirements/commands established by God’s first acts of creation

cultural mandate – The command in Genesis 1:28 instructing humanity to develop and rule the creation to display God's glory

doxa – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “praise,” “honor,” “glory”

ecclesiastical – Relating to the church, especially as an established institution

ethical judgment – The application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

ethics – The study of moral right and wrong; the study of what is good and what is evil

existential perspective – Ethical perspective that considers the person, the motives, and the inner leading of the Holy Spirit; one of the three perspectives on human knowledge used by theologian John Frame in his Tri-Perspectivalism; concerned with the response of the believing heart through emotion and feeling

Great Commission – Christ's appointment of the eleven faithful apostles as his authoritative representatives and his charge to spread the kingdom of God throughout the whole world (Matthew 28:19-20)

kavod – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning “glory” or “honor”

kingdom of God – God’s sovereign and unchanging rule over all of creation

normative perspective – Ethical perspective that looks to God's Word as the norm or standard for making ethical decisions

proto-euangelion/protoevangelion – Theological term for "first gospel" or the first promise of redemption found in Genesis 3:15

situational perspective – Approach to ethics with an emphasis on the situation and how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions

suzerain – A powerful emperor or king that ruled over smaller nations; the more powerful party of a covenant, the one to whom it was necessary to submit

vassal – A king or nation that must submit to a more powerful emperor or king (suzerain)

Westminster Shorter Catechism – A traditional Protestant summary of Christian teaching, originally published in 1647