

The Message of the Kingdom

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Kingdom Basics
Mark1:14ff

I wanted to begin by thanking many of you for praying for me while I was away with one of our pastors, John Moriarty, and a physician in this church, Steve Kitchen—we were away on a brief missions trip to India. The purpose of our trip to India was to first of all, visit our dear friend, A. Stephen, who is an Indian church planter. This church has given a substantial sum of money toward the building of a training center in India. One of the crying needs among Indian pastors is for deeper training—training in such basics as preaching and discipleship, praying for the sick and learning about marriage counseling and so on.

We discovered over the years that Indian pastors often far surpass American pastors in their willingness to sacrifice and their great zeal for Christ. But there is definitely a shortfall in terms of their training and knowledge base. And so I went over, first of all, to do training for Indian pastors. We got the leaders of A.'s church planting movement together and I conducted five days of training with them from morning through evening. John Moriarty helped.

And then we met with one of our missionaries from this church, Andy Saperstein, who flew down from Pakistan, and we spent two days of wonderful fellowship with Andy. We had an opportunity to encourage him and bless him, along with giving Andy about half a ton of gifts, books and food from various members of the church.

Finally, we went onto the city of Madras, India, where the first Vineyard church in India is being planted. There is an Indian national who is planting a Vineyard church after spending time here in the US, becoming acquainted with the Vineyard. He went back to India and he is planting the first Vineyard church there. I did a conference for them on the theme that I wrote about in *Empowered Evangelicals*. So we had a very full trip.

I did get sick while I was there and I appreciated your prayers about that. Unfortunately, I got really sick when I came home. But I am better now and none the worse for the wear and tear. In fact, I think I needed to lose a few pounds, so I would recommend the Indian Diet for any of you who need to lose weight. I am thinking about just bottling some of their water and marketing that. It is a very quick weight loss system. It is not very good for you. You feel miserable through the process, but the net result is that you drop a few pounds.

It was a good trip and I just want you to know that this church, the Columbus Vineyard, is making a significant difference in the lives of many people around the world. Because of this church's gifts, a training center is going to be built in Bangalore, India. I got to lay the cornerstones for the building. It will likely be completed by next summer. Then they are going to start training dozens of young men and women in the areas of church planting and evangelism and

pastoral service. So the multiplied benefits of this church's giving is just enormous. And then in meeting with Andy and the potential for his team's work among Muslim believers is also enormous. I want to encourage you that this church is having a worldwide impact and that what you give really does make a difference.

Now, bringing it closer to home, perhaps you have seen the digging that is going on in the back of the building. If you haven't, you might want to drive by. The ground has been cleared. We are getting ready to begin construction on a new auditorium that will be hooked onto the back of this building along with some new children's ministry space and other spaces for a Borders-type of Christian bookstore.

You will be hearing a great deal about the building as we launch a building campaign in the fall. You will have lots of information about it. There will be lots of opportunities to pray, to hear God's mind together regarding the future of our ministry here in Columbus.

But you know, before we start the construction of a new building, I want to make sure that our spiritual foundations are right here in the church. A building, after all, is just a tool, it is just a means for us to do spiritual ministry. I certainly didn't become a pastor in order to build a building. I became a pastor in order to construct a ministry and to see people's lives built, in order to affect change in real people. The Columbus Vineyard's ministry is not the ministry of building buildings, or building facilities. That is just a container for the spiritual ministry, the spiritual impact that we want to have here in the Central Ohio area and also around the world.

But I believe that we need to check our foundations spiritually before we try to build physically. That is why I would like to begin a series today on Kingdom Basics and begin to teach again about the fundamental message that is at the heart of the New Testament and the heart of this church and that is the message of the Kingdom of God. So, if you have a Bible, what I would like for you to do is turn with me to Mark 1:14, which reads this way:

"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God, [or preaching the gospel of God as many translations put it] saying, 'The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news [or believe the gospel].'"

This morning what we are going to do is examine The Message of the Kingdom of God. In this series on Kingdom Basics, we are going to look at some of the indicators, some of the characteristics, of the preaching of the good news of the kingdom of God. Before we do that, why don't we invite the Lord's presence. Let's pray.

Now, when the Bible says that Jesus came preaching the good news of God or the gospel of God, that little phrase "good news" or "gospel" has a long history in the Greek world and also in the Jewish world of the New Testament. The Greeks and the Romans understood the notion of good news or gospel. The Greeks and Romans were off fighting battles in far off lands and people back in the home city would be waiting for news regarding what happened in the battle. How did our armies do? Maybe more personally, how is my son? my husband?

my brother? Is he alive? Is all well with our soldiers in this far off battle? And messengers would be sent from the battlefield to go back to Rome and to announce to the city victory.

That was the gospel. The gospel was victory over our enemies. The good news sounded like this: We won! The enemy is defeated! We suffered few losses in battle. The gospel was a call to rejoice in the victory over our enemies and their forces.

And in the Old Testament you have a picture of this proclamation of good news when the Philistines cut off the head of King Saul, who was their enemy, and took his head and put it on a stake to display it in their pagan temples. They took away his sword and shield and went through the pagan temple proclaiming, "Good news. We won."

It wasn't just a victory over an enemy that was gospel. The birth of a new Emperor would also be gospel – good news. A new age has dawned with the birth of our new Emperor. And even the birthday of the Emperor was celebrated as gospel – good news. In fact, back in Roman days people didn't work a 40-hour workweek. They didn't get the weekend off. They didn't have paid holidays or vacations. Common people labored from sun up to sundown every day of the week. So the Emperor's birthday, or a day which victory was proclaimed over an enemy, was taken as a holiday. Sacrifices were made to the Roman gods. There might be a parade of victorious Roman troops. But for the average working man or woman, a day off to celebrate, to party, - oh, that was good news.

Now, let's take these ideas of victories over enemies and the birth of a new Emperor, a celebration and party and let's put them in a biblical context so that we understand what Jesus was announcing. Around 586 BC, about 600 years before Jesus came, the Jews were kicked out of the Promised Land, the land that is now called Israel. Invaders came from the north from Babylon. They came and destroyed the Jewish Temple. These invaders came and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. They came and took many Jewish men, women and children as prisoners and slaves and dragged them off to the land of Babylon, which is now in modern day Iraq.

And the Jewish prophets began to speak of a day when the Lord, himself, would come and reign over the Jewish people once again. The Lord would re-establish rulership. The prophets spoke of a day when the kingdom would return to Israel, when they wouldn't live under their enemies – whether the Babylonians or the Greeks or the Romans. They spoke of a day of gospel, of good news, saying one day, one day, not now, but one day in the future the Lord is going to come and our enemies will be defeated. And all that oppresses us will be removed. Messengers would go out into the streets saying, "Stop your work. It is time to celebrate. It is time to rejoice. It is time to party. The Lord has come back to Israel to reign as King." What is the message of the kingdom of God? It is simply that the Lord has come to establish his reign, his rule, and to defeat Israel's enemies.

Imagine the stir that arose when after 600 years of prophecies saying, "One day the Lord will come. One day we will defeat our enemies. One day oppression will stop when God visits." Jesus comes and says, "It's here. The

day is here. The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.”

You have planned for months for your wedding day. You have looked forward to it. You have dreamed of your wedding your whole life. And now the day is here. All your hopes, your dreams, your fantasies are all here. It is all being realized. Good news – your wedding day.

You have looked forward to graduation after 13 years of school or 17 years of school or whatever number of years. You have looked forward to this day when it will all be done. You get your diploma and, oh, the oppression will cease. No more papers. No more exams. No more finals. It is over. Good news – what you have looked forward to has now come.

Now, over the next number of weeks we are going to explore the specific dimensions of the good news. The misunderstanding the Jews had regarding what they were hearing and the true understanding of what Jesus meant to communicate when he said “The kingdom has come.” But let’s explore this morning some of the features, some of the characteristics of this message of the good news of God, the message of the kingdom coming. First of all, we see that it is a message about time. Jesus says, “The time has come.” And I think you can circle in your Bible this word “time.” The kingdom of God is a message about time and the importance about time to God and how God wants to communicate the importance of time to us.

See, I believe apart from continual contact with Jesus Christ, we lose a sense of the importance of time. Think of all the things people do with time. We kill time. I am just here killing time. We waste time. We spend time. We believe we have all the time in the world. Apart from contact with the Lord Jesus Christ, men and women live with an illusion, a great lie, which is that we have an infinite amount of this resource called time. Or to put it a different way, much of what Jesus wants to communicate to us is designed to shatter the illusion of our own immortality – that we have all the time in the world to do what we need to do. Men and women, apart from Christ, always live with an illusion that they are immortal, that they have an infinite amount of this resource called time.

Psalms 90 contains this verse: “Lord, teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” In other words, God, keep me in touch with the flow of sand through the hourglass. Help me, God, to pay attention to the calendar and to the second hand that is sweeping around. Watch so that I can escape the lie, moment by moment and day by day, that my life is anything but brief here on the earth.

Friend, your life is brief. We have a brief time here in this world. Our marriages, even the best of marriages, the longest of marriages, are brief. We have a brief time with our kids. A brief time to effect anything in terms of making a positive contribution in this world. Our lives really are like Elton John’s song about Princess Diana. Our lives are like candles in the wind quickly blown out. That is one of the messages that God wants to get through to you. That your life really is a candle in the wind. Time flies when you are having fun and it flies when you are not having fun.

We do not have all the time in the world with our children. Parents you need to know this when one day you are bouncing your child on your knee and the next day it seems they are leaving home. Or they are getting married. We are facing that with my son's graduation from high school. He is leaving. It wasn't all that long ago that I was carrying him around on my shoulders. Time flies.

We don't have all the time in the world with our parents. It seems one day they are healthy and vigorous. And then we see them in decline, in their sunset, and then they are gone. Time flies.

We don't have all the time in the world to reconcile a broken relationship or to show appreciation to our spouses, or to share the gospel with a friend or loved one.

Part of the message of the kingdom of God concerns time: the value of time, the scarcity of time. Contact with Jesus always makes a person more sensitive to time. And by way of contact, I think you can measure the current state of your spiritual life by how in touch you are in the core of your being with the brevity of time, the importance of time.

Now, there is another feature of time that the message of the kingdom of God brings home to us. When Jesus said, "The time has come" he wasn't saying, "Well, I see on my calendar that it is March 1, 27 AD, time for my ministry to begin." When Jesus said, "The time has come" the word that is used here is a Greek word *Kairos* – it often means the right time has come, the propitious moment, the significant moment is here. It is like a pregnant woman might say when she turns to her husband and looks at him and says, "Honey, its time." She doesn't mean it is 4:30. She means this is it. This is the moment. The baby is coming. It is a word that a pastor might use when he looks at a nervous groom backstage before the wedding and says, "Well, friend, according to my watch, its time. This is the moment and it is for all the marbles right now."

It is a feeling a parent might have when their child comes home after breaking up with their first boyfriend or girlfriend. The sensitive parent realizes this is an important moment. It is time to shut the TV off. It is time to stop cleaning. It is time to put the newspaper down. This is a time for empathy, for paying attention. I don't get these moments very often in my child's life, or a moment for sowing something important. This is my window of opportunity. What I say now, what I do now really matters, so I better be paying attention.

The message of the kingdom is a message about important moments. Being aware of significant times. It is a message about life moments in history and in world history and personal history. And we as a church family are about to face one of those "Kairos" moments in the building of this auditorium that we are putting up outside. This fall, we as a church family, are being brought to a crossroads decision regarding what are we to become for the next 30-50 years as a church. We are plunging headlong toward one of these decisive moments where we say as a church family, "Yes, we hear what God's calling is on the Columbus Vineyard and we say 'yes' to it." Here is our window of opportunity. It's here and now, we need to respond.

Or we have all the time in the world. There will be another baby and maybe then I will drive you to the hospital. There will be another open door in your life,

son, and maybe then I will take time to talk with you. There will be another moment to share the gospel and maybe then...maybe then. God brings *Kairos* moments, significant moments, pregnant moments, along and spiritually sensitive people are people who seize the moment to respond.

I had one of those “this is it” moments, “this is a big deal” conversation, with my mother last year. As many of you know, I was raised in a Jewish family. I came to Christ with virtually no background whatever in understanding the message of the Bible. I knew nothing about Jesus. I knew nothing about the cross. When people say, “It is difficult for me to become a Christian, I don’t have any church background” I think to myself, “Friend, you couldn’t have any less background than I had.” I didn’t start at ground zero; I started in a big hole. And that is where my family was and certainly where my mother was. So we had a conversation last year in which mom became very soft. I saw a different side of her than I had seen in the past and she said, “You know, I know I made a lot of mistakes with you and your sisters growing up. I know I wasn’t the best mom I could be. But I have tried to make up for it and I have tried to ask for forgiveness.” Pregnant moment. Not a time to turn the TV on.

I said to her, “Mom, are you asking for forgiveness?”

She began to tear up and she said, “You mean I have never asked?”

I said, “No, Mom, you never have asked.”

She said, “Will you forgive me for the kind of mother I was when you were growing up?”

I told her immediately, “Of course, I forgive you. I don’t judge you.”

But then the Lord led me to say, “You know, Mom, ultimately it really doesn’t matter whether I forgive you or not. It doesn’t matter whether my two sisters forgive you or not. Mom, you are going to die full of guilt unless you receive forgiveness from Jesus. Your conscience will never be free. You will never feel really forgiven until you tell God that you blew it when we were growing up and you ask his forgiveness. He promises that he will forgive you because he sent his Son, Jesus, to die and pay for all your sins.”

Well she was just in tears at this point. I would love to say that the deal was closed and that she received Christ. She didn’t. But she is a lot closer than she ever was. It was a *Kairos* moment.

Do you know those moments when a door opens, when there is a window of opportunity in the life of a family member or friend?

I want to pause for a moment and describe for a moment God’s incredible capacity for choosing just the right moment in sending his Son, Jesus. God uses windows of opportunity in history. In the same way he would call us to be spiritually sensitive to propitious moments, to those grace-filled opportunities, God uses the same moments. He sovereignly creates situations to introduce his plan in history. Jesus Christ could not have come at a better moment. The apostle Paul underlines this in Galatians 4 when he says, “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” When the time was ripe. It was the perfect time for God to send his Son.

Why was it such a perfect time for the Son of God to enter the world? Let me share with you a few reasons to show how God uses opportune moments. When

Jesus came the entire Mediterranean world from Spain to Persia, and all the way across North Africa, was under the so-called *Pax Romana* – the Roman Peace. Had Jesus been born a half century earlier the gospel probably would not have spread the same that it did. A half century earlier Rome was wracked by civil wars and internal strife, armies fighting each other. The *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, that spread across the Mediterranean world wasn't established until 31 BC when Octavius finally defeated Marc Antony and his mistress Cleopatra. When Christ came into the world, the world was for the first time in many centuries, and for the first time for many centuries to come, at peace. The whole Roman Empire was garrisoned about by Roman armies.

Not only was there a great peace, but the Romans built a road system that stretched throughout the Empire so that travel was very easy. It was never easier to travel from the time of Jesus until the mid-1800's. Think about it. The world had to wait for 1800 years for travel to be easier throughout the whole Roman Empire. You could travel anywhere without a passport.

Not only was there this great Roman peace and a great road system where you could travel without a passport, but all of the Roman world spoke one language – Greek. A missionary didn't have to go to language school for four years to bring the gospel to another tribal group or nation. The whole Roman world spoke the same language – Greek. And religiously and philosophically the philosophers had discredited all the gods in the Empire so that people were spiritually hungry. The gods had failed them. Their religions were on the way out. People stopped believing the old myths.

Now, God planned it perfectly for the gospel to spread. And I believe that we may be arriving at just such a propitious moment for the Lord once again to return. After 20 centuries we may be at the moment, it may be very near. Transportation has made it very easy for us to get anywhere in the world very quickly. There is the spread of another major language – English, so that in such an awesome way in many countries English has been adopted as the official second language. And virtually wherever you go in large cities around the world, people speak English. And then there is a massive move to do away with passports. If you are part of the European Union, you can just drive from the northern islands of Scotland under the English Channel and throughout Europe without ever stopping at a border guard. The fact is, as I read my Bible there are only three things that need to occur before Jesus returns and all of them can happen in a moment. The gospel has to be preached to all nations, according to Matt. 24:14. And not only does the gospel have to be preached, but the Jews have to be reached, according to Romans 11. And the third thing that has to happen in a prophetic timetable is that antichrist must be revealed, this great opponent and counterfeit of Christianity. The antichrist must be revealed according to 2 Thess. 2. These three things: the gospel is preached to all nations, the Jews are being reached, and the antichrist is revealed –can happen very, very quickly.

There are a lot of folks who say, "Oh, you know, people have been preaching for 2000 years that Jesus was near. How can the coming of Christ be near for 2000 years?"

Let me give you an illustration that I love from the Catholic convert, Cardinal John Henry Newman. He said, "Imagine a stream that runs parallel with the edge of a cliff, just a few feet away from the edge, for several miles. At any moment the stream could suddenly turn and the water could go over the cliff in a great waterfall. That is a picture of time." We are right now very close to the edge as a planet. At any moment time could break and we could fall over the edge and we would be in eternity. Yes we have been flowing along the edge of the cliff for many, many years. But it seems to me friends that the moment for the Lord's return may be upon us. Our world looks very much like the world into which Jesus stepped 2000 years ago.

The message of the kingdom is not only a message regarding time, but put in Jesus' words, is an urgency. The time has come. There is an urgency, a need for a response now, that Jesus is demanding.

I believe that it is impossible to maintain any sense of kingdom urgency, that how we live our lives today and the decisions we make really matters apart from continual connection with Christ. We are talking about doing a Summer Harvest Crusade here in a few weeks. We are encouraging people to invite friends and relatives. Many of us will probably say, "I will take care of that manna. It is no big deal if I knock on a neighbor's door and invite them to Summer Harvest." "It is a little uncomfortable. It is no big deal if I invite a co-worker or try to bring a parent or child or a spouse."

I tell you there is no way for you to maintain any sense of urgency regarding Christ. It is this idea that the fire alarm is ringing. It is time for us to rush out of the building and save our lives. There is no way to maintain urgency apart from contact, continual contact with Christ. See, Jesus Christ has an urgent heart. Jesus is the only one who continually has this radical now. Now is the day of salvation. You need to deal with it now, now is the time of repentance.

But when we drift from contact with Jesus, when we are not opening our spirits before him on a regular basis, then we come under the influence of another spirit, the spirit of Satan, which is always a spirit of procrastination. There is no radical now. I can put off repentance until tomorrow. I can put off speaking with a person until tomorrow. I believe American Christianity, by and large, has lost any sense of urgency. We have been in reaction for almost 50 years to the fire and brimstone preachers who used to say, "Well, let me tell you a story about a woman who was at our meeting just a few weeks ago. I was calling people to Christ and she resisted. She said, 'I am young. I have plenty of time.' She walked out of the meeting making no decision. On the way home she was flipping through the radio dial and looking for her favorite station when she hit a patch of ice. She was going 50 mph. Her car spun out of control and she hit a bridge abutment. It took the paramedics almost 45 minutes to get her out of the car. They had to use the Jaws of Life to open the car up and when they got to her she had already died." She entered eternity without Christ.

For about 50 years we have been in reaction. We have said, "Oh, come on. We are too sophisticated." Maybe some preachers have abused this notion of urgency. Maybe they tried to create an artificial sense of urgency. I will tell you I don't think we need any more urgency than that which comes from the Spirit of

Christ. Urgency runs through the New Testament. People are told in the New Testament, "Today, when you hear his voice, don't harden your hearts." If God is speaking to you about something you need to do, an area you need to repent about, a relationship you need to reconcile, a person you need to talk to, do it today. Do it now. That is the New Testament message.

I have always likened the kingdom of God to a merry-go-round where a person is sitting on one of the horses going around and around. And someone is just on the perimeter of the merry-go-round with their hand out. As that person goes around on the horse, they can reach out and grab hold of the hand on the perimeter of the merry-go-round. But if they say, "I will wait" it takes an entire revolution to come back to that point again. They drift farther and farther away from the outstretched hand. I really believe that is the way it is regarding the grace of God and windows of opportunity to really move forward in your relationship with Christ. Or to make a difference in the life of someone else there are windows of opportunity. We can reach out at the opportune moment and grab it, or we let it go and it takes an entire revolution. Maybe we don't come around to that point again for six months or a year.

A couple of years ago I was talking with a woman on the Oval at OSU. She was very near to receiving Christ, very near. She said, "I don't want to do it now, I want to wait." I said, "Listen, I am not going to artificially turn up the pressure on you at all. This needs to be your decision and not something you are coerced into. But I want you to hear this. Do you hear Jesus knocking on the door of your heart right now? Do you hear Christ saying, 'Let me into your life.'"

She said, "Yes, I feel like God is really speaking to me. I really do need to yield my life to Christ."

I said, "Then do it now, because you won't hear the knocking as loudly tomorrow. Tomorrow you are going to be busy taking an exam. And a week from now you will be dealing with something from your boyfriend. A month from now this conversation is going to be a distant memory."

The grace for repentance when it comes to you whether in conversion or to repent of a sin, the grace for repentance is not always equally available. There is an urgency. When it is there, grab it. The grace for conversion is not always equally available. When it is there there is an urgency and you need to grab it. The grace to reach a child who is drifting is not always there. Parents you are watching your child drift from God, reach out and rescue them today. Today, talk with them even if it is uncomfortable, even if it is awkward. Even if the lines have been stretched. Today, talk with your child. Perhaps you have a friend whose marriage is breaking up. God has laid resolve in your heart, "I am going to call a marriage counselor. We are going in. I am going to talk with a Small Group leader."

The Kingdom of God is a message of urgency. When grace is there to pray, you need to respond and pray. As the Lord presses on you, don't say, "I will pray in an hour." Trust me, if you are like me, you won't pray in an hour. I will invite that person to Summer Harvest tomorrow – you won't. You won't do it. If the grace of God is there now, if the Lord is speaking to you now, you need to respond now.

The message of the kingdom is an urgent message and the message of the kingdom is an accessible message. The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. The kingdom of God is at hand. It is in your reach, as one writer put it.

If there is one dimension of the message of the kingdom that we have tried to underline with the existence of the Vineyard by the ministry that we are doing here, it is this notion that the kingdom of God is accessible, it is within reach of every man, woman and child. See, what we are trying to form here as a church is a community in which you are from a wealthy suburb in Central Ohio, and you have a neighbor who is a professional or who owns their own business, you could invite your neighbor or friend here to the Vineyard and they are going to hear something that enables them to easily grab hold of Christ – easily. That Christ is so accessible, so near, that all they need to do is reach out their hand and grab hold. We are trying to form a church community in which if you live in one of the tougher neighborhoods in Columbus and you have a friend who is out of work and you invite them to come to this church they could easily reach out their hand and grab hold of Christ. That Christ is so near and real, that it is so easy to grab hold of him and get changed.

For too long and in too many churches in America people have had to jump over hurdles and climb over barriers like some Marine obstacle course in order to get to Christ. Sit in pews that are like torture chambers, straight hard wooden backed, listening to words that are not understandable unless you are one who has been initiated for the last 30 years. You sing hymns about subjects that you know nothing about. I love you, O Beulah land. What in the world is Beulah land? Or that verse in the hymn that says, I will raise my Ebenezer. You have to be around Christianity a long time before you say, “I know what Ebenezer is.” It is not Scrooge from Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. It is the stone of help that Samuel raised in 1 Samuel. Goodness, that takes some Bible knowledge. Its all played on a pipe organ, which is a really popular instrument if you flip through your radio dial. There are a lot of pipe organ stations.

For too long people in the U.S. had to go through two conversions to become a Christian. They had to be converted to church. They had to climb through all these obstacles and know when to bow and when to stand and when to give the responsive reading and how to respond to the robes and all of that. They had to get converted to church before they got converted to Christ. Well, Vineyard ministry exists to get rid of the first conversion. To say, “Hey, Jesus is near. He is accessible.” All you have to do is reach out and lay hold of him. Just open up your heart and respond to him and he will draw near to you. It doesn’t matter what you have done. It doesn’t matter how you have blown it. Vineyard is here to communicate a message: Jesus is near. And if you will be soft, if you choose to be responsive, you can connect with him today, this moment, right now.

You say, “Exactly what do I need to do to reach out and grab hold of God? What do I need to do in this moment to get connected again with Jesus?”

God sent his Son into the world, good news, he’s come announcing victory over your enemies, sin, death, Satan, sickness. Good news – the Lord reigns. God stepped off the throne and he has come. How do I lay hold of him?

The message of the kingdom is a decisive message. Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news.

It is a timely message. It is an urgent message. It is an accessible message. It is a decisive message. The message of the kingdom calls men and women to radical decision now. Repent and believe.

A lot of people don't understand repentance and they confuse it with the word penance – this notion that when we sin we have to perform some religious ritual in order to return to God. I have to do penance. I have to say five "Our Fathers" or seven "Hail Mary's" or go to church every day. Penance. There is no biblical ground whatsoever for the notion of penance if you mean some religious duty or some ritual that you have to go through in order to grab hold of Jesus Christ.

The Bible speaks of repentance. It involves two things. In the Old Testament repentance meant basically to make an about face. You are walking in one direction away from God. You have been running from God, repentance means to turn around and make an about face to turn 180 degrees and move toward God. And so, in the Old Testament the understanding of repentance was turning around.

In the New Testament, the word for repentance means a change of your mind, an inward change that results in a change in behavior. You used to think one way about God, sin, and the way you were going to live your life, but now you have gone through and had a change of mind and change of attitude about God. Instead of being in a changed place in your life, you have decided to make God first in your life. You have changed your mind about sin. Instead of saying, "I find real life and enjoyment and satisfaction in this particular sin" you say, "No, I have changed my mind about this. I see this sin is particularly killing me. It is destroying me and my happiness. It is destroying my relationship with God." This inward change of mind about God, about sin, about yourself, results in a change of behavior.

And we see this biblical picture of repentance in Matt. 21:28 when Jesus says, "A certain man had two sons. He came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in my vineyard.' He answered and said, 'I will not.' But afterwards he repented and he went." He changed his mind about his father's will. He changed his mind and it resulted in a change of action. You reverse your thinking and it results in the way you live. Repentance.

You have your back toward God right now. And instead of continuing to move away from him in the area of your dating relationship, you turn back to him and say, "Father, I want your will." We are born with our backs toward God and before we come to Christ, every step we take is a step away from God.

One writer, the great scholar at Cambridge University, Derek Prince said, "As people walk away from God, the light is behind them and the shadows before them. The further they go, the longer and darker the shadows become. Each step that one takes is a step nearer to the end, a step nearer to the grave, nearer to hell, nearer to the endless darkness of a lost eternity."

To be saved there is one thing a person must do first.

1. You have to stop. They have to change their mind. They have to change their direction. They have to turn back, turn around, face the opposite

way, turn their back on the shadows and face the light. This first essential act is called repentance and it is a command for anyone who wants to come under Jesus' reign and rule. It is not a suggestion; it is a present imperative. Jesus commands you to turn and to keep on turning. Keep on changing your mind about God, sin, and self. About time and urgency. Keep on changing your mind so that it results in a change in your behavior.

A lot of people say that if you start talking about repentance it sounds a lot like works or something. Aren't we saved by faith alone?

I believe saving faith always involves repentance. Repentance is a picture of what faith looks like. You can't have true faith without repentance. Repentance is turning from sin and turning to God. And that is all faith is. Faith means you stop relying on yourself. When Jesus says "Believe," he means stop believing in yourself. Stop relying on yourself and your schemes and your strategies and your can-do philosophies. Put your complete confidence, your total trust, cast yourself upon, rest upon, commit yourself to Jesus. Instead of trusting in yourself and what you can do and what you can produce to make yourself acceptable to God, totally entrust yourself to Jesus.

It is like that commercial with the little 3-year old boy who is standing on the ladder by a lake. He is clinging to the ladder and his dad is saying, "Come on. Jump off the ladder. Throw yourself into my arms. I will hold you up." So long as he holds on to the ladder he is not leaning on his dad. There comes a moment in the commercial where the little boy trusts his father enough to jump off the ladder. You see Dad grab hold of him and hold him out of the water. That is what a person needs to do to be saved – jump into the arms of Jesus.

You say, "I am going to rely on your death and your resurrection. That is what will keep me afloat before God on the Day of Judgment."

When I stand before God in judgment, the thing that will keep me from sinking like a stone and from going to hell is the fact that I have leaned on you and your precious death for my sins. It is not only for eternity that a person hears the message of the kingdom and leans on Christ. It is now. What is it that Jesus wants you to lean on him for now? To not rely on your own strategies, your own way through, your own nobility, your own good works – what is it that Jesus wants you to rely on him now for? The way we lay hold of Christ is that we repent and we believe.

Do you have to throw yourself on Christ and trust in him for the healing of a broken marriage? I can't figure out how this whole thing is going to work out, but I have to jump. And I am going to wrap my arms around your neck, trusting that you can keep me up.

Do you have to trust in Christ for help with an addictive behavior? Lord, I am too weak. I can't overcome this in my own strength and so I wrap myself around you and trust that by your power I will move forward and be free.

I know I need to trust in Christ. We as a church community are going to need to trust in Christ as we move forward in this building campaign. It is a huge undertaking. It is beyond our capacity. It really is going to be the kind of thing

that unless God comes through, we will fail. It is the sort of thing that could keep me up at night worrying unless I throw my arms around Christ.

What do you need to trust Christ for? Completion of a degree? The healing of your body? A way out of a financial hole that you have dug or that has been dug for you?

Here are some of the tests of the message of the kingdom of God. Here is how you know if you are in touch with Jesus, in touch with the message of the Kingdom of God.

Are you in touch again with the importance of time and that you don't have all the time in the world?

Are you sensitive to opportune moments, to divine moments, divine appointments, and windows that God wants you to enter?

Are you maintaining a sense of urgency? That this business of relationship with God, there is radical now to what you need to do.

Is Christ obviously accessible to you? That you can reach out and grab hold of him by turning around in repentance? And by entrusting yourself and your future to him?

This is the message of the kingdom and it is good news. Let's pray.