

“Who concerning the truth have misaimed”—2 Tim. 2:18

Misaiming concerning the Kingdom of the Heavens

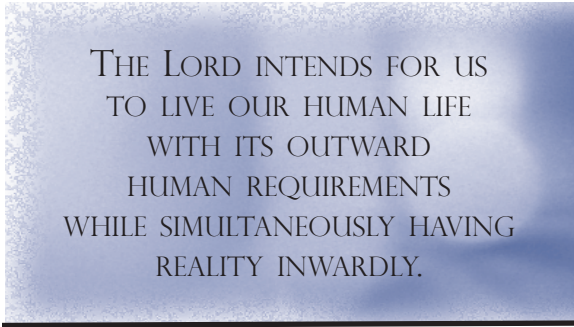
Misaiming: “In the kingdom of productivity, the goal is to get more and more done in less and less time. Speed is success. In the kingdom of heaven, by contrast, there is no cheating the time it really takes: to visit the widow, to welcome the outcast, to cultivate a vocation, to tend a marriage, to raise a child, to nurture a friendship, to grow a deeply formed life” (Jen Pollock Michel, “To Dust We Will Return,” *Christianity Today*, Nov-Dec 2022).

Truth: The author makes a commendable central point concerning not being enslaved to a “kingdom of productivity,” which is a perspective of accomplishing many things in our limited time on earth. She urges us to instead focus on the “kingdom of heaven” by engaging in certain Christian works without the constraint of time, to “grow a deeply formed life” before our time on earth expires. Such advice appears fitting for a chaotic twenty-first-century world and in the context of our humanly uncertain future and lifespan. The author’s view may be summed up as that of balancing outward activities with outward works for God. Such a view, however, is inadequate for living in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens as described in the New Testament.

While the New Testament does bring out the aspect of the service of a Christian in outward works for the kingdom (cf. Matt. 25:14-30; James 2:17), it also reveals that not all Christian works done in the Lord’s name are according to the will of the “Father who is in the heavens” (Matt. 7:21). The Lord stated unequivocally that many will ask Him “in that day, Lord, Lord, was it not in Your name that we prophesied, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name did many works of power?” (v. 22). For many the Lord’s assessment of those works will be an unwelcome surprise: “And then I will declare to them: I never knew you. Depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness” (v. 23). This striking statement, of course, does not mean that believers will lose their

eternal salvation (John 10:28); it instead points to an intrinsic truth—that it is possible to engage in visible physical “works” in His name and for His “kingdom” that are, in fact, not considered or approved by Him to be a work that is part of the kingdom of the heavens. The apostle Paul states that all works will in fact be tested through fire: “the fire itself will prove each one’s work, of what sort it is” (1 Cor. 3:13). Paul then goes on to say, “If anyone’s work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward” (v. 14).

The previous short overview of Scripture, then, reveals that all our Christian work will be manifested and assessed by the Lord at His second coming. Some believers will receive a “reward,” that is, reigning with Him in His heavenly millennial kingdom (Rev. 20:6). Others, however, though genuine believers, will not be rewarded and will need to pass through a period of discipline (Matt. 25:30).



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This quandary of a Christian’s work being tested and judged then begs the question of how the Lord will discern or determine which works are part of His kingdom and which are not. Interestingly enough, in speaking of His second coming and those who are ready to be raptured, the Lord spoke to His disciples ostensibly concerning a living in the so-called “kingdom of productivity” as noted above; in Matthew 24:40-41 He spoke of two believers who are “[working] in the field” and two believers who are “grinding at the mill”—“one is taken,” and “one is left.” With respect to His coming kingdom, the line of demarcation between the believer who is taken and the believer who is not¹ reveals that the difference between what is and what is not a “deeply formed life” in the kingdom is not defined by one’s outward activities per se but by something more intrinsic. In chapter 13 the Lord likened His kingdom to that of a living seed of life sown into the “soil” of the “good earth,” that is, the good heart, of His believers. The seed grows unto maturity in the midst of potential pitfalls related to worldly traffic (the “way”), a shallow heart (the “rocky places”), and the anxiety of the age and the deceitfulness of riches (the “thorns”) (vv. 3-11, 22). The

Lord's interpretation of these passages indicates that these cases, especially the second and third, refer to ones who are genuinely regenerated but are frustrated from fully maturing. It is significant that in Matthew 24:40-41 the Lord did not say that He would come while the believers are doing work for the kingdom; instead, He said that He would come when they are engaged in their human occupations (e.g., "in the field" and "grinding at the mill"). This shows that the Lord intends for us to live our human life with its outward human requirements while simultaneously having reality inwardly. It is, hence, not an issue of what one does outwardly but of what is happening within "the hidden man of the heart" (1 Pet. 3:4) within every believer.

Thus, in one sense, a life in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens occurs irrespective of whether one is outwardly living in the "kingdom of productivity" or in the "kingdom of the heavens." For in fact—as Matthew 24:40-41 makes clear—Christians truly doing the will of God for the kingdom live in two places at the same time. On one hand, they are in the earthly, physical realm of their occupation; on the other hand, they are at the same time living intrinsically and inwardly in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. In this heavenly kingdom the heavenly King as the seed sown into the believers dispenses Himself into their hearts (cf. Eph. 3:17) to carry out His central work. As He does so, He may then lead His followers to do His will, which they carry out in outward activities while remaining simultaneously in His presence (2 Cor. 2:10). It is a living that is carried out in His presence that will be met with His approval: "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful

over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21, 23).

The need for the intrinsic reality of the kingdom is also reflected at the end of the New Testament. In the epistle to the church in Ephesus in Revelation, the Lord appraised her for her works, labor, and endurance yet faults her for a lack of reality: "You have left your first love" (2:4). As believers, our focus should not be first on our outward works but on the "first works" (v. 5) that are done out of our "first love" for the Lord. As we are loving the Lord, we learn to take the inward position of sitting at His feet like Mary did and thereby receiving a divine revelation of His heart (Luke 10:39). We can then carry out what He desires, as opposed to being "drawn about with much serving" (v. 40), not having first enjoyed His inward leading, speaking, and guidance for our Christian work.

May we all be saved from a life of mere outward Christian work for His kingdom to an intrinsic life lived in two realms. On one hand, the inward reality of His kingdom is lived out in us in a hidden way; on the other hand, it is reflected and exhibited by a matching service that is faithful to His will in seeking first His kingdom.

by James Kuan

Note

¹Note that the Lord's audience in Matthew 24 is believers, not unbelievers. Here He is speaking to followers (i.e., believers), as they are charged to "watch therefore" and to "be ready" for His coming (vv. 42, 44)—words that would not be spoken to unbelievers.

Footnotes from the *Recovery Version of the Bible*

"Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will **enter** into the kingdom of the heavens, but he who does the will of My Father who is in the heavens" (Matt. 7:21).

enter: To enter into the kingdom of the heavens, we need to do two things: call on the Lord and do the will of the heavenly Father. To call on the Lord suffices for us to be saved (Rom. 10:13), but to enter into the kingdom of the heavens, we also need to do the will of the heavenly Father. Hence, not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter into the kingdom of the heavens; but those who call on the Lord and do the will of the heavenly Father will enter in.

Since entering into the kingdom of the heavens requires doing the will of the heavenly Father, it is clearly different from entering into the kingdom of God through regeneration (John 3:3, 5). The latter entrance is gained through being born of the divine life; the former, through the living of that life.

"Then I will declare to them: I never **knew** you. Depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23).

knew: *Knew* here means *approved*. The same word in Rom. 7:15 is translated *acknowledge*. The Lord never approved those who, in His name, prophesied, cast out demons, and did many works of power (v. 22), but did those things not according to the will of the heavenly Father (v. 21). The Lord did not deny that they did those things, but He considered those things lawlessness because they were not done according to the will of the heavenly Father; they were not done in line with the divine will. Thus, those who do such things, even in the Lord's name, will not enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but will depart from the Lord, that is, be excluded from the manifestation of the kingdom in the coming age.