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Seeking the Kingdom of God

Exegesis of Matthew 6:33

"But seek first His kingdom (Kingdom of God/Heaven) and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

1. The verse seems fairly straightforward at first glance, but takes on additional shades of meaning as the terms are defined. Primarily seeking, seeking as a highest priority the things of God, of the spirit will have the effect of adding all "these things" to our lives. "These things" are, in immediate context, all the needs listed in the "do not worry" passage from Mt 6:25-34, in which this passage is located. But in the larger sense, this verse sums up the entire Sermon on the Mount from Mt 5-7. It's huge in scope, like the Golden Rule; a maxim that operates on all levels of our lives.
 - a. Although the verse is set in a passage of prose that is didactic in nature, it functions most like a proverb, a terse, brief little saying, quotable and easily digested, with a single principle of truth to convey. (Virkler, pg 161-162) The saying is intended to focus the mind on the wisdom of following first things first.
 - b. Jesus speaks this saying in the larger context of his Sermon on the Mount near the beginning of his Galilean ministry when he is riding an initial wave of enthusiastic response from multitudes of people from all over Palestine and Syria. On seeing the crowds following, he moves up the side of a mountain to teach. This moment, early on in his ministry, is Jesus' attempt at conveying the whole theme and content of his teachings. The main theme being the Kingdom of God or Heaven, with a secondary theme of God's righteousness. With these two themes, Jesus begins refocusing his audience from a merely legal and macro (community-based) relationship with God, to a loving and micro (individual-based) relationship. All of the teachings in the Sermon are geared to help his audience make this quantum leap in thinking/relating; creating a whole new worldview and paradigm for them to see themselves in relation to God. Mt 6:33 functions as reference point within the Sermon, to sum it up and serve as a touchstone for all the teachings.
2. Key words that need to be defined in order to grasp the full meaning of Jesus' teaching in this verse are: seek (first), Kingdom (of God/Heaven), righteousness (of God), and "all these things."
 - a. Seek: (Zeteo) to seek in order to find, to seek a thing by thinking, meditating, reasoning, to enquire into, to seek after, seek for, aim at, strive after, to crave, demand something from someone. Some words used to translate this word include (numbers indicate times used in NT): deliberating, 1; demanding, 1; inquire, 1; kept trying to obtain, 2; looking, 11; made efforts, 1; search, 4; searched, 1; seek, 36; seek after, 1; seeking, 35; seeks, 9; sought, 4; striving, 1; tried, 1; trying, 1.
 - b. Kingdom: (Basileia) royal power, kingship, dominion, rule. *Not to be confused with an actual kingdom but rather the right or authority to rule over a kingdom.* Secondly, a kingdom, the territory subject to the rule of a king. This definition is key, as the Kingdom of God is major theme and framework of Jesus' entire ministry and teaching, its meaning is key to understanding all teaching connected with it. The fact that the kingdom is not a place but the dominion or sway of the king puts all Jesus' teaching into new light. (see below)
 - c. Righteousness: (Dikaiosune) in a broad sense: state of him who is as he ought to be, righteousness, the condition acceptable to God; the doctrine concerning the way in which man may attain a state approved of God; integrity, virtue, purity of life, rightness,

correctness of thinking feeling, and acting. In a narrower sense, justice or the virtue which gives each his due.

3. To further define the key words, look at the immediate context and some key cross references below:
 - a. **Seek.** Mt 6:33 comes at the end of a passage dealing with the anxiety caused by meeting life's needs. Jesus speaks about food, water, survival needs, clothing. Basic necessities of life that he says all people (Gentiles) strive after. He states that these are very real needs and God knows we need them. By juxtaposing seeking after the Kingdom/righteousness here, Jesus is stating that this seeking (after God) is to be of an even higher order than after the basic necessities of life. This speaks to an intensity that is best expressed as craving, desire, demanding. There is the sense of continuing always to seek, crave, demand, desire, the Kingdom/righteousness in the Greek. This idea will be expanded upon below in the idea/concept of the "breakers" in relation to the kingdom.
 - b. **Kingdom.** As stated above, this is the most important single concept in the NT.
 - i. **The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven are interchangeable terms.** Matthew primarily uses Kingdom of Heaven as a euphemism for Kingdom of God so as not to use the holy name of God, which was practice among the Jews. To name a thing was to show dominion over it—blasphemy; to pronounce it incorrectly was a violation of law. The Hebrew word for heaven, shemaya, was a standard euphemism for God in the first century. It's also extremely important to note that for the ancient Jews, shemaya, heaven, was not a place, it was a person, YHVH—God. Not only that, the ancient Jews (and to this day) have no set doctrine concerning the afterlife. There is no developed idea of heaven and hell as in Christianity. In fact, the Torah has no concept or mention of an afterlife at all, which is why the Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife, living only by the Pentateuch. This figures large, since most contemporary Christians regard the Kingdom of God/Heaven to be heaven—a place in the Christian concept of afterlife. This thinking will directly skew all of Jesus' teachings in terms of our behavior and concept of salvation.
 - ii. **The Kingdom of God is not heaven (a place).** Basileia (gr) and the Hebrew/Aramaic word behind that, malkut, both refer to the dominion, rule, sway, reign, or even the presence or will of the king. The term Kingdom of God is not original to Jesus. It was a common phrase/concept in Rabbinical Judaism by the time of Jesus, and understood as defined here. When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom, he's not talking about a place, heaven, that is to come in the afterlife, but a dynamic, living presence of God in our lives right here and now. The next two cross-references will amplify this.
 - iii. **The Kingdom of God is here and now.** Jesus states in Mk 1:15 that the waiting is over, the Kingdom is here. Though many translations render the Greek word eggizo as near or at hand, it can just as easily be rendered as having already arrived, and considering other passages dealing with the Kingdom, makes more sense to do so. The Kingdom refers neither to a place or time, but to a condition of relationship between God and man. It is active, dynamic, always in motion—God ruling in the lives of men, or better, people living in the conscious presence of God. Jesus is announcing that with his presence and teaching, that condition is now.
 - iv. **The Kingdom of God is within/among us.** Jesus said in Lk 17:21 that the Kingdom will not come with observation, that the Kingdom is within us. The Greek preposition here, entos, can be translated either within, among, or in the

midst of. In this case, it seems all translations apply. Again, this reference reinforces the now-ness and non-territoriality of this Kingdom, as well as the intimacy and immediacy of it to us.

- v. **The Kingdom is breaking out with pent-up desire.** Related to the concept above and the concept of seeking as craving or intense desire, is the meaning of the strange verse at Mt 11:12, which in KJV is translated as the “Kingdom suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.” This passage seems wildly out of touch with all the other descriptions of Kingdom at first glance, looking at the two key words in the passage “biazo” translated in KJV as “suffers violence” (remember that in KJV English to suffer is to “permit”, so this phrase means literally allows/permits violence) would be better translated as “forcefully advancing (as in NIV) or even better, as “breaks forth.” The second word “biastai,” translated in KJV as “the violent” or “violent men” would be better translated as the “breakers.” The Septuagint uses this word to translate the Hebrew word “haporetz,” which means “breakers” in the translation of Micah 2:13. In this passage, the breakers literally prepare the way for the King by breaking through the gate and opening a way. More to the point, the verb form of this word in the Hebrew, harpazo can mean to take, steal, capture, grasp, catch, pursue, seek earnestly—all amplifying the verb seek above. This captures the relationship between John Baptizer and Jesus perfectly.

This same idea is conveyed in John 10:9 where Jesus says, “I am the door/gate (of the sheepfold). The image here, that would have been obvious to a first century audience in Palestine, is that the sheepfold, usually made of stacks of rocks with an opening on one side, would constrain the sheep at night. Often, the shepherd would lie and sleep in the opening literally becoming the door or gate that restrained the sheep. The sheep would be so anxious to get out to pasture by morning, that they would rush the opening once the shepherd moved, jumping and jostling and breaking the opening further, knocking down rocks in their haste to get out.

So the best translation of Mt 11:12 would be something like, “The Kingdom of God breaks forth, and those breaking forth are pursuing, (seeking) it.” The idea is that the Kingdom originates from within and moves outward in an explosive, unrestrained manner, with the excitement and earnestness of those pursuing/seeking it.

- vi. **The Kingdom is active, not passive.** Jesus says in Mt 18:3, “Whoever humbles himself like a child will be the greatest in the Kingdom of God.” Here, the word translated as child, talya, (Aramaic) means both child and house servant. The idea is that to live in the Kingdom requires the active trust, wonder, and energy of the child along with the humility and service of the servant. Again, the Kingdom is pictured as a dynamic, living in the presence or the will of the King, the Father.
- c. **Righteousness.** What does the phrase God’s righteousness mean in terms of Jesus’ usage? First off, it’s pretty plain that in Scripture the “righteous” are set up as the opposite of “sinners.” So if we define sinners, we can define the righteous as well. Part of this answer comes from the culture and worldview of the ancient Near East where “sin” was seen as anything that was unclean, that is, did not function as it was intended within the community. This meant a sinner was someone who was ill, or diseased or handicapped, or whose relationships were broken, who was too poor to engage in normal commerce. It also meant someone who did not follow normal civil etiquette/customs or did not follow the law. Anything that broke the normal flow of the community was unclean

and sinful. By extension, the Pharisees, with whom Jesus often sparred, believed that a sinner could be distinguished from the righteous by their actions/behavior and circumstances. That is, whether they followed the Law and customs, had correct social and racial positions, and had good physical health and wealth. In other words, righteousness was based on legalism, racism, and elitism. And beyond that, they believed their righteousness depended on their own separation from all sin and sinners.

Jesus opposed this view on all levels. He stated that righteousness was not about separation/isolation from sin and sinners. In Mk 2:17, he says that the sick need the physician. His righteousness is not compromised by his contact with “sinners.” On the physical/financial level, Jesus de-links the idea that righteousness is connected with good health/wealth. In John 9, Jesus states that the blind man had done nothing to deserve his blindness. The paralytic in Mk 2 and the infirm man at Bethsaida in John 5 are both healed without any change of status. That is, they are already worthy of healing in Jesus’ estimation. On the legal front, Jesus quotes in Mt 9:13 a verse from Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” It is not the law/ritual that makes one righteous, but mercy, compassion, and knowledge of God (following his ways). Finally, on the racial/social level, Jesus sits at table with anyone/everyone. Jesus’ feast with Levi and the tax collectors in Mk 2 is one of many graphic examples of Jesus crossing boundaries of race and social position—showing complete acceptance for everyone, which in the ancient world was an endorsement of them and their position.

So God’s righteousness to Jesus means a healthy relationship with God and all others—one that is defined by complete acceptance and full functioning of all parts of a person’s life. It has nothing to do with circumstance or accidents of birth, and everything to do with the condition of a person’s heart in relation to others.

4. Based on all the above, a good working interpretation of Mt 6:6 would be:

Always continue to earnestly pursue and intensely desire living in the conscious presence and will of God right here and now and every moment of your life, in a vibrant and healthy relationship defined by caring for others as you would care for yourself. Once your life reflects this relationship with God and others, all your needs will already have been met, because your circumstances will no longer dictate your joy in life and your will and the Father’s will be one and same, so that your prayers and desires will already be fulfilled before you ask.

It’s important to see how radically different this interpretation is from a traditional Christian point of view. First of all, we’re not seeking “heaven” a place of eternal bliss in the next life, but a vibrant and dynamic living in the presence of God right here and now. We’re not seeking righteousness in the form of modified and regulated behavior patterns in order to meet some external standards of goodness and acceptance, but simply good and functional relationships with everyone around us and therefore with God. Relationships characterized by the unconditional acceptance and love that Jesus modeled for us, and which is characterized by fully functioning community. And, our seeking itself, is not a static adherence to a set of beliefs, creeds, or doctrine, and not even a moral code to follow, but a barely contained excitement and joy at the prospect of another moment with the Creator. And finally, the promise of the things that will be added is not a promise of having all of our physical needs and wants met on our own terms, as if this was some sort of quid pro quo arrangement with God with God under contractual obligation to perform. Rather, as Paul tried to convey when he said he had learned to be content in all circumstances, it is an aligning of our will and God’s will so that we are never disappointed. In taking our joy from the Kingdom—the living, breathing presence of God every moment of our lives, and the healthy and vibrant relationships we possess, our circumstances become less and less important in defining our happiness from moment to moment. All the things we need and desire become those things that God is already providing in abundance.

5. As Christians, we spend far too much time petitioning God to change our circumstances so we can be happy, and when our circumstances don't change in the way we expect, we spend more time questioning God's presence in our lives or our worthiness in his eyes. This verse and the whole of Jesus' teaching is a massive realignment, if we're willing to be realigned, to see the world through God's eyes, and come into his presence, his Kingdom, right here and now.