

The First Petition

by Isaac Errett

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the kingdom of heaven and the means by which its objects are to be accomplished, primarily through the power of truth and the word of God.

Scripture: Daniel 2:44, Mark 16:15, John 3:5, John 17:21, Romans 14:17, Ephesians 2:19, Ephesians 4:11, Hebrews 12:28
Topics: "Kingdom Of God", "Church Unity"

Description

Isaac Errett preaches about the nature and objectives of the Kingdom of Heaven as depicted in the New Testament, emphasizing its divine origin, aggressive spirit, universal dominion, and ultimate triumph. He highlights the importance of prayer, unity, and love among believers as essential means to accomplish the goals of the Kingdom. Errett stresses the significance of public preaching of the Gospel, the maintenance of church order and worship, and the missionary spirit within the Church for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. He urges believers to prioritize the Kingdom of Heaven in their thoughts, prayers, plans, and offerings, emphasizing the need for a deep consecration to the service of the King.

Transcript

EVERY careful reader of the New Testament will have learned that the narratives of Matthew, Mark and Luke, are largely occupied with teachings and preachings concerning the Kingdom of Heaven. There are four distinct ministers--those of John, Jesus, the Twelve, and the Seventy--whose special object is, the announcement of a Kingdom, heavenly in its origin and aims, soon to be established in the earth. Matt. iii:1-12; iv:17; x:1-7; Luke x:1-11. This approaching kingdom was the burden, not only of preaching and teaching, but of prayer, as will be seen in the language of the text. We assume here, that the limits of this discourse will not allow us to prove, that this kingdom denotes the spiritual reign of the Messiah--the gospel dispensation; that we have the history of its formal establishment in the second chapter of the Acts of Apostles; and that the embodiment is found in what is afterward known as the Church of God. But while affirming that this petition had its immediate fulfillment in the notable [299] events narrated in the second chapter of Acts, we are far from supposing that the spirit and scope of the prayer are confined to the occurrences of that Pentecostal season. It is important to estimate aright the value of that chapter, as furnishing the starting point in the authoritative announcement of the kingly power of Jesus, of the terms of salvation under his reign, and of the planting of the divinely organized society, to be thenceforth known as his church. But it is only the beginning. It is the germ of an institution which is to live through all ages the little stone cut out of the mountain without hands, which is to become a great mountain and fill the whole earth. Dan. ii:44, 45. While, therefore, this petition has a meaning, on the lips of the original disciples,

which it can not now have; we still regard it as a suitable prayer to be used by the intelligent Christian, in its wider scope, as embracing the grand objects of the reign of Grace--the world-wide and age-lasting achievements of the kingdom of the heavens.

We design, in this discourse, to speak of the nature and objects of this kingdom, and of the means by which these objects are to be accomplished.

I. Touching the nature and objects of the kingdom of heaven, let the reader pause, and carefully peruse the second and seventh chapters of the book of Daniel. From these he will gather the following deeply interesting particulars:

1. This kingdom differs from the kingdom of this [300] world in possessing a divine origin. Its symbol is not an image made with human hands, but a stone cut out of the mountain without hands. The God of heaven was to set up this kingdom. In the seventh chapter, the symbol is not a beast rising out of a stormy sea, as with the brutal and monstrous tyrannies of earthly empires, springing from wars and revolutions; but a son of man, coming in the clouds of heaven, and receiving from the Ancient of Days, dominion and glory. It is therefore a spiritual kingdom, in opposition to earthly and carnal kingdoms; and is meant to redeem, elevate and glorify man, in opposition to the oppressive, corrupting and degrading tendencies of the kingdoms of this world.

2. This kingdom is essentially aggressive and revolutionary in its spirit and aims. The little stone is to smite the image, break it in pieces, and grind it to powder.

All who become citizens of this kingdom, are therefore enlisted in a positive, aggressive warfare against all that dishonors God, and degrades humanity.

3. This kingdom is to pass through severe and protracted struggles with opposing powers. The little horn is to make war with the saints and prevail against them. As in the personal history of her king, sufferings come before glory--the cross before the crown.

4. It aims at universal dominion. Its objects are world-wide in their scope. [301]

5. It will surely triumph. However severe and protracted the struggles and the sufferings of the saints, the time will surely come when this little stone, becoming a mountain, shall fill the whole earth; when the kingdom and dominion, and greatness of the kingdom, under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.

This petition, in the light of these prophetic announcements, is a prayer for the overthrow of all false governments and false religions; for the universal spread of the dominion of truth, holiness and love; and for the uplifting of our sin-oppressed race from the hopeless grave where human governments leave them, to the immortal glories and dominions of the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

In the light of these considerations, what an interest gathers about the philanthropic mission of our Saviour, as He proceeds to lay the foundations of this universal empire of truth and righteousness and peace! and what a loftiness and holiness belong to the mission of every Christian, who is enlisted as a co-worker with the Lord, in this magnificent scheme of human redemption!

II. After this rapid, but, we trust, not unsatisfactory glance at the nature and object of the kingdom of heaven, we hasten to the consideration of that which we meant to be the burden of this sermon-- [302] the means by which these objects are to be accomplished.

There is the most remarkable contrast, in this respect, between earthly kingdoms and this kingdom of the heavens. When Pilate, alarmed at the charge preferred against Jesus, of setting up claims to royalty, inquired anxiously, Art thou the king of the Jews? the answer was, My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate, not yet relieved pressed the question Art thou a king then? which brought out more fully the spiritual nature of his reign: Thou sayst that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this purpose came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. John xviii:33-37. This kingdom was to be maintained by the power of truth, and not by the power of the sword. Its conquests were to be mighty, but bloodless.

For the greaves of the armed warrior in the conflict,

And the garment rolled in much blood,

Shall be for a burning, even for the fire.

For unto us a Child is born; unto us a Son is given;

And the government shall be upon his shoulder:

And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor,

The mighty God, the Father of the everlasting age, the Prince of Peace

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end; [303]

Upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom;

To fix it, and establish it

With judgment and with justice, henceforth and for ever:

The zeal of JEHOVAH God of hosts will do this.

(Lowth's Isaiah, ix:4-7.)

At this time of bitter and bloody strife in our land, when all our confidence seems to be centered in military skill and prowess, and when, amidst the professional followers of Jesus, many are abandoning all hope of the conversion of the world by moral and spiritual forces; it is important to refresh our minds with the testimonies of the Spirit so clearly uttered in the predictions of the Old Testament, and the teachings of Christ and his apostles.

When Isaiah announces the establishing of the Lord's house, the rebuking of the nations, and the spread of peace and good will among men, he uncovers the source of this revolutionizing and regenerating power in these words: For the law shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Isa. ii:2-4. In like manner, in the eleventh chapter, when describing the king arrayed for his conquests: The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him; the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit

of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. Isa. xi:2. And after he has again set forth, in the most beautiful imagery, the universal reign of peace and holy brotherhood, he gives the reason of it in these words [304] For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. ver. 9. The word of God is living. Heb. iv:12. The word of God is powerful. The word of God is eternal. I Pet. 1:24, 25. The word of God teems with the energies of spiritual life. John vi:63. From the magazines of Jehovah's power, this means has been selected as the most perfectly adapted to the wants of human nature, and to the achievement of the great ends of the kingdom of Christ. The entire harmony between Old Testament prophecies and New Testament facts and teachings on this point, may be seen by the following statements:

1. We have already heard the Saviour affirm respecting his kingdom, that he came to establish it by bearing witness to the truth.
2. The mission of the Holy Spirit, for the conversion of the world, is likewise associated with the utterance of truth. He is called, therefore, the Spirit of truth; and the express promise to the apostles was, He shall guide you into all truth. John xvi:13.
3. When our Lord sent his apostles forth to push the conquests of his kingdom, he bade them rely on the message of truth and grace committed to them, and on divine protection in its utterance. Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Mark xvi:15. Go teach all nations. . . . And to I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Matt. xxviii:19, 20.
4. The first gift bestowed by the Spirit on these [305] ambassadors of Christ was the gift of tongues, that they might speak in all languages, the words of this, life; and by the spiritual energy of the truth thus divinely communicated, they pierced the hearts of sinners, and turned them by thousands to the Lord. Acts ii:1-41.
5. The kingdom of heaven is compared to a sower going forth to sow, and the seed of the kingdom is declared to be the word of God. Luke viii:11. As rationally expect wheat to grow without seed, as to look for the fruits of the Spirit where the Word of God has not been received into the heart. The germ of the harvest is in the living seed.
6. The failure to save men is traced to a failure in conveying the truth to their hearts. This people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. Matt. xiii:15; see also Rom. x:14-17; 2 Cor. iv:3, 4.

In view of these and kindred facts, we are bold to affirm that nothing is wanting to the conversion of the world, but that all men everywhere should hear, understand, and receive the Word of God, the gospel of salvation. It is the power of God to salvation to every one that believeth, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. We can not here enter into an analysis of this word of life, to show its adaptness to this great end. We throw ourselves on the broad [306] declarations of Holy Scripture, and in the face of all the babbling philosophies of earth, and of all the trembling doubts of the professed people of God, declare that it is so, and must be so, and will inevitably prove to be so, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

But let it be carefully observed, that it is the Word of God, not on the printed page, but in the human heart, that is to achieve this result. We have not, therefore, fully met the inquiry as to the means of success in promoting the objects of this kingdom. There must be means and agencies to convey this word to the

hearts of men. These means are both divine and human. It is impossible for us to know all the providential and spiritual agencies employed by the king to give free course to his Gospel. We know that he has promised to be with the ambassadors of his reign unto the end of the world. We know that all the sufficiency, even of inspired apostles, was of God; that while, as spiritual husbandmen, they planted and watered, it was God that gave the increase. We know that they were divinely guided into some fields of labor, and divinely restrained from entering other fields. We can readily perceive how vast a space is left for providential workings, and consequently for constant and earnest prayer, after all that belongs to human agency has been accomplished. Some nations may be so far sunken in sin and delusion as to be irrecoverable; the judgments of the Almighty can exterminate [307] them. Other nations may be in an unfavorable condition for attending to the message of life; the governor of the nation, by a train of mercies or of judgments, may prepare them to receive it. In the wide range of freedom that belongs to the human mind, there may be long and wide-spread reigns of falsehood and delusion; the earth may be deluged with error; but there is one who sitteth above the floods, and stilleth the raging of the seas, who will, after long patience, cause the waters to abate, and stretch the bow of peace over a redeemed world. Human tyrannies may forbid the spread of truth; ecclesiastical despotisms may banish the light, imprison the saints, and threaten to annihilate the kingdom of God; but He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision. The Word of God is not bound. The truth never pauses. In God's own good time these tyrannies crumble to the dust, hoary systems of error sink into contempt, and the Word of God comes forth from its banishment to live and abide forever. The same principles of the divine government which we recognize in his dealings with nations and ages, are applicable likewise to communities and to individuals. So that, in all cases, we may have the cheering assurance that Christ is with his truth and with its advocates, and that greater is he that is in us, than he that is in the world. I John, iv:4.

Let us look now at the human instrumentalities to be employed in the salvation of the world. [308]

In the divine arrangement, the Church is to be this light of the world. To her members--to all of them--is given the solemn charge of holding forth the word of life. In the primitive Church, there were special gifts and extraordinary offices, to meet the exigencies of the Church's infancy; but these were only until the weakness of infancy was outgrown, and the means of grace were perfectly developed. Eph. iv:11-16. Jesus taught his disciples that they were to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Matt. v:13, 14. Paul taught the Philippians that they were to shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life. Peter taught Christians that they constituted a royal priesthood, a chosen race, a peculiar people, for this very purpose, that they might show forth the praises of him that called them from darkness into his marvelous light.

This they were to do:

1. By the testimony of a holy life. Let your light so shine, that others seeing your good works may glorify your Father who is in heaven. Matt. v:16. And ye became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the ward in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit; so that ye were examples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad, so that we need not to speak anything. For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and [309] how ye turned from idols to serve the living and true God. I Thess. i:6-13. Do all things without murmurings and disputings, that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life.

Phil. ii:14-16. The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things serveth Christ, is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Rom. xiv:17, 18.

2. More particularly, the union, harmony, and love of the saints is to win the world to Christ.

I pray . . . that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. John xvii:21. So peculiar to the religion of Jesus is the spirit of love and peace, that he has made this the badge of discipleship: By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another. John xiii:35. The spirit of the world is a spirit of selfishness; and its bitter fruits are unrighteousness, oppression, anger, hatred, envy, malice, revenge.

The spirit of Christ is a spirit of love, and its blessed fruits are righteousness, kindness, forgiveness, meekness, and active benevolence. To subdue the enmities and rivalries of Pharisee and Sadducee, of Jew and Samaritan, and unite them in harmonious association, was a heavenly work, and carried with it great converting power. To unite [310] Jew and Gentile in one body, and bring together Pharisee, Sadducee, Samaritan, with Epicurean and Stoic, Roman and Greek, Barbarian and Scythian, bond and free, eliminating all the elements of discord, and binding in affectionate and happy brotherhood, men of all creeds, ranks, and conditions, was indeed a miracle of grace, which more than all else attracted the hearts of men to the Gospel.

Nor was this a merely theoretical oneness. While there were occasional outbreaks of an evil spirit, it is evident that the primitive Church was animated by such a love, and marked by such a unity of spirit as had never been seen before. There was one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body, one spirit, one hope, one God and Father of all. Eph. iv:4-6. In the unity of interest and affection, which belonged to the primitive Church, there were the most beautiful and touching and captivating displays of the sentiment of brotherhood, in the maintenance of the poor, sympathy with the suffering, relief of those who were in the bonds, and even in laying down their lives for one another.

So long as a deep spiritual life pervaded the Church, and the spirit of sect was subjugated by the spirit of love, the onward marches of the soldiers of the cross were marked by a succession of gorgeous triumphs of grace. The gods of the nations fell before the cross, like Dagon before the Ark of Jehovah. Temples were forsaken, altars crumbled, and the hoary superstitions of ages, more extensive and powerful than even the political [311] despotism of the Roman empire, tottered to their foundations.

The world seemed already to lie prostrate before the spiritual potencies of the kingdom of heaven. But when prosperity gave birth to pride, and pride gave birth to sects, and sects gave birth to anger, strife, and every evil work, the glory departed from Israel. Lured by the attractions of heathen philosophy, enticed by the smiles of worldly friendship, the heroes of the faith were lulled to sleep in the lap of the Delilah of earthly pride; and there, shorn of their strength, and robbed of spiritual vision, they became blind and foolish, and helpless.

Let the fearful lesson be well considered. Selfishness, pride, and sectarian strife are the brood of perdition; Satan is their father, and hell their native air. Love, humility, and holy brotherhood are the fruits of the Spirit of God. They only can successfully labor for the conversion of the world, who are one with Christ, and one with each other, and who develop the spiritual life which they have received from God in brotherly affection and in a world-wide philanthropy.

3. A third means of extending the triumphs of the cross, is the maintenance of the order and worship of the Church. All the ordinances and appointments of the Lord's house are means of Grace--ministrations of light and life. Prayer, praise, preaching, teaching, exhortation, the Lord's Day, the Lord's Supper, together with the social sympathies and affections continually cultured in a well [312] ordered church, furnish heavenly influences for the salvation of the sinful. The Spirit of God operates not only through the word spoken, but through the whole harmonious life of the body which that Spirit animates. Thus the Church becomes the pillar and ground of the truth. I Tim. iii:15. Of the churches in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria it is said, that walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied. And to the church in Corinth, Paul says, that if they faithfully perform the functions of a church, the unbeliever is convinced of all, is judged of all; and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth. I Cor. xiv:24, 25. No one can honestly pray, in the spirit of this petition, Thy kingdom come, who does not, to the extent of his ability, contribute to the vigor and energy of the church of which he is a member, to make it a center of living and loving influences, whence light and love may radiate to the community round about.

4. That on which the Scriptures lay most stress, for the conversion of the world, is the public preaching of the Gospel. This is the most popular and efficient means of promoting the blissful objects of the reign of the Messiah. Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. Mark xvi:15. It hath pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. I Cor. i:21. How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? [313] and how shall they hear without a preacher. Rom. x:14. Accordingly we find the church in Jerusalem sending Barnabas to Antioch; Acts xi:22, and Antioch sending out Paul and Barnabas through an extensive region of country; Acts xiii:2, 3, and the disciples, when driven from Jerusalem, went everywhere preaching the word. Acts viii:4.

Whether this shall be accomplished by the individual efforts of those to whom the Lord opens the way, or by the benevolence of a single church, or by a combination of the means of two, or fifty, or a thousand churches, must be decided on the ground of expediency, and not on the basis of a divine prescription. In a religion meant for all the world, there can be but few positive statutes. We are under a law of liberty. Much must be left to the judgment of the children of God, in every age and in every country, so far as matters of expediency are concerned. And if we are only studious not to trench on the few positive statutes that are given, if we duly respect the general sentiment of the Church in all expedients, and are careful to violate the Christian liberty of none of our brethren, there can be no danger in voluntary associations of Christians in a neighborhood, county, state, province, or nation, to further the aims of the kingdom of God. The matter of greatest moment is the possession by the Church of the genuine missionary spirit. If there is that deep and earnest consecration to the work of the Lord which distinguished the Jerusalem church, [314] which led her members to give up all their property for the work of Christ, Acts ii:44, 45 and iv:34-37, which made preachers of her deacons, Acts vii:2 and viii:5, and which finally sent out the mass of her membership to preach the word of life; Acts viii:4; we should not be long troubled about the necessary expedients. Money, personal influence, learning, talents, and labor would all be "willingly offered"; the Church would have her messengers in every scene of degradation and suffering, her colporteurs in every lane and alley, and on every highway; her tracts and sermons in every house; her preachers in every city and wilderness, in the islands of the sea, and at the ends of the earth, praying, Thy kingdom come, and laboring in the spirit of the prayer.

Has it ever struck your mind, that when our Lord taught his disciples to pray, this was the first petition he taught them? He thus instructed them that the kingdom of God was to be first in their thoughts and

desires. Not even their daily bread was to be sought until they had first prayed, Thy kingdom come. Ah, my brethren, how far have we wandered from the pure spiritual loves and aims of our Saviour's teachings? How entirely have we been immersed in the cares and ambitions of earth! Who makes the kingdom of heaven first in his thoughts, first in his prayers, first in his plans, first in his offerings? We toil for wealth, and excuse ourselves from the toils of the kingdom on the score of business necessity! We use our wealth to minister to the [315] lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, and give whatever fragments we can spare from such purposes, to advance the interests of the Church! We bestow the strength of our days for earthly pelf, for political ambitions, or social position; and have scarcely time amidst our feverish excitements and carking cares to pause long enough to utter with thought and heart even this short prayer--Thy kingdom come! How few hearts are burdened with the weight of this mighty enterprise for the salvation of the lost! How few know the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ--and how few consequently know the power of his resurrection! We do not doubt that there are many thousands who have not bowed the knee to Baal, and we do not, therefore, use the language of despondency. But when we see where our blessed Lord places the interests of his kingdom--in the front rank of all interests and of all prayers, we can not but raise a voice of earnest admonition, that we may be awakened to a more entire consecration to the service of the king.

Reader! Are you a citizen of the kingdom of heaven? Have you, by a birth of water and of the Spirit, entered into the kingdom of God? John iii:5. Do you enjoy the peculiar treasures of this Kingdom--righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit? Rom. xiv:17. Being delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son, have you been made meet for the inheritance of the saints and of the household of God? [316] Eph. ii:19. How great the grace! how rich the mercy! how exalted your honors! how cheering your hopes! All your durable treasures are laid up in this kingdom. All earthly powers will be shaken, but the kingdom of God can not be moved. Heb. xii:28. In this kingdom every citizen is a king and a partner of the throne of the king eternal. He can not fail. He can not perish. He will be more than a conqueror here; and glory, honor, and immortality await him in the heavens! His ransomed nature is destined to the brightest and the noblest fame that a created intelligence can possess. Blood-bought, toiling, terrible, victorious, glorified human nature--it is, in all the universe, the grandest monument of heaven's wisdom and graces, and is worthy to stand "nearest the throne and first in song." I need not ask you if you are grateful for your inheritance, happy in your privileges, and joyful in your hopes. I will not insult you with the question if you could be induced to sell your immortal birth-right for any mess of pottage this life can afford? But let me ask you whether you may not be more grateful, and enlarge your own joy by an increased devotion to the work of the Lord? Jesus has done great things for you, my brother! He gave all--all for you and for me; became a slave, a felon, and drank the bitterest cup of death ever pressed to human lips, for our salvation. Have we given all for him--all? Have we kept back no part of the price? Are wealth, influence, mind, heart, tongue, and hands freely consecrated to his service? [317] Is his kingdom more than daily bread to us? Let us never feel at ease until we are sure that this is the first petition of our hearts--Thy kingdom come a prayer never to cease until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, that he may reign for ever and ever. [318]

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