LET JESUS DISCIPLE YOU

Seek First the Kingdom

What Jesus talked about more than anything else — and what it actually means to go looking for it

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, October 18, 2026
PASSAGES	Matthew 6:31-33; Luke 19:11-15; Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 12:28; Luke 17:20-21; Luke 18:16-17; Revelation 21:1-4
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:04:41 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than he talked about anything else, and he meant neither a Christianized nation nor a warm feeling inside a believer. A kingdom is first of all an authority — whose word runs — and the king has gone away to receive his kingdom and will bring it back. Seeking it means living under its laws now, in a world whose own kingdoms are shadows and ash compared to the glory of God's kingdom.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Across Matthew, Mark and Luke — about ninety pages of a pew Bible — Jesus mentions the kingdom over 120 times. There are more parables he explicitly likens to the kingdom than parables he does not.
- “Seek first the kingdom” is given as the cure for anxiety. The time you are not spending worrying is time to spend seeking.
- A kingdom is not mainly land or population. It is the authority to be king — which is why Jesus can say the kingdom is at hand before his ministry has barely started.

- Over-physicalizing the kingdom turns discipleship into a project of making the world Christian so that Jesus has something nice to come back to. Luke 19 rules that out — and Scripture says the opposite is coming: apostasy reigns before he returns, and no amount of agreement summons him early.
- Over-spiritualizing it turns the kingdom into a metaphor for inner change. The return of the king and the new earth are not metaphors.
- Christ is king now in truth; he is not yet king in practice everywhere. Both halves of that sentence have to stay.
- Your first citizenship is the kingdom of God. Obey the authorities over you — but when the two laws conflict, you obey the kingdom you actually belong to.
- God does not raise and lower nations according to their church attendance. Rome did not fall because it was insufficiently Christian, and America is not a thousand-year project riding on next Sunday's numbers.

▶ 1:04:41

Wes started where the middle schoolers and high schoolers he works with keep landing. They go out and ask their friends and classmates and co-workers what the gospel is about, and the answer comes back: Jesus, he really only talked about love. That is not inaccurate, Wes said, but it is technically inaccurate. Count the times Jesus says the word love in the Gospels and it is fewer than you would guess. Count the times he says *kingdom* and it is not close.

What Jesus talked about most

▶ 1:05:56

“The kingdom of God doesn't roll off the tongue,” Wes admitted. Tell someone that Jesus was mainly about the kingdom of God and you get a blank look, because nobody knows what that is. Which is a problem, since the command is to go looking for it. So the message had two questions, in order: what did Jesus mean by the kingdom, and what does it mean to seek it.

> "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."
>
> MATTHEW 6:31–33 ↗

Jesus is saying: stop worrying, and spend the time you were going to spend worrying on seeking the kingdom. "And everyone's like, yeah, I understand exactly what that means, Jesus. Thank you very much. Got it, one hundred percent."

The scale is worth sitting with. Matthew, Mark and Luke take up roughly ninety pages of the pew Bible, and in them Jesus names the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, or simply the kingdom more than 120 times. Open a page of a Gospel at random and the odds are good. The parables are the same story: the mustard seed, the sower, the unforgiving servant, the workers, the wedding feast, the leaven — Jesus introduces more parables by saying *this is like the kingdom* than he does without it. That tells us something.

Four passages that refuse to settle down

▶ 1:09:52

Wes read a handful to get our toes wet, and the point of reading them together is how hard they are to pin down. Start at the beginning, with John newly arrested and Jesus barely underway:

> "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'"
>
> MARK 1:14–15 ↗

Not after the cross, not after the resurrection — at hand already. Then, accused of casting out demons by demonic power, Jesus answers that
if he casts them out by the Spirit of God, the kingdom of God has come upon the Pharisees — it is in their midst, standing in front of them. Wes pushed on how strange that is as a use of the word. We think of kingdoms as governments, laws, societies, cultures. When did you last say a kingdom had arrived because one person walked into the room.

▶ 1:12:14

Then the Pharisees ask the question we would all like answered.

> "Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'"
>
> LUKE 17:20–21 ↗

"Jesus, why are you being deliberately obtuse about this?" Wes said, voicing the frustration honestly. The kingdom is here, the kingdom is there, and also you cannot see it coming. And then the question of who belongs to it gets answered by children:
"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God… whoever does not

Two ways to miss it

▶ 1:14:31

Wes laid out three ways Christians have read all this, waved the first two off, and spent the rest of the message on the third, which is both of them held together.

The first error over-physicalizes. Many Jews in Jesus' day — including a good number of his own disciples — read the prophets to mean a Messiah who would set up an actual nation with Israel at the center of the world: judges, laws, tax codes, a military, the whole nine yards. When Jesus did not do that, it upset people. Wes was careful to say not every Jewish person expected it, but enough did that the Gospels are full of disciples misunderstanding and Jesus patiently telling them they will get it one day.

That instinct survives in the church in subtler dress — the stream of thought that says the kingdom of God is the church making the world Christian. Get the governments to run on God's laws, make the whole world one theocracy, and Jesus returns to a planet that already adores him. Most of us would call that silly out loud, and yet it is a short walk from there to doing Jesus' work for him.

A nobleman who leaves to receive a kingdom

▶ 1:18:14

This is the parable Wes thinks explains the kingdom better than any other, and it was told for exactly the misunderstanding above.

> "As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. He said therefore, 'A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, "Engage in business until I come." But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to reign over us." When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business.'"
>
> LUKE 19:11–15 ↗

Verse 12 is the strange one. Nobody fetches a kingdom from somewhere else and carries it home. Rome did not send an emperor abroad to bring a kingdom back; Rome conquered. Wes wondered aloud whether the disciples were scratching their heads — and the room answered him. That is what Herod did, someone said; he went to Rome to get the kingdom and came back. The kingdom is the authority.

▶ 1:20:30

"Yes," Wes said. "I'm getting there." A kingdom is obviously not just land and not just people. As Steve put it from the pew, it is the authority to be king. So the nobleman is Jesus, who is in a very far country at the moment — somewhere the citizens of his kingdom have no access to — and who is bringing the kingdom back with him when he returns. The disciples expected him to exercise that authority then and there, in Jerusalem, that week. He was days from being crucified.

▶ 1:23:07

The opposite error over-spiritualizes: the kingdom as a placeholder word for the inner work God does in a heart, the revitalization of your spirit toward Christ, with no physical reality to it and no literal return. That misses it too, because Jesus is coming back and he is bringing a kingdom. It is both. Ever since God broke into his own creation and became part of it, he has been king of that creation in a very real way — and where Christians mold their will to his and pick up the cross and follow, the kingdom is genuinely present, because that is what it is for God to be king. But Christ reigns in truth without yet reigning in practice. There are still nations, still our flesh, still the pull away from him. When he returns and we are his bride in the new heavens and new earth, none of those distractions will be left.

Kingdoms have laws, and so does this one

▶ 1:27:20

So how do you seek a kingdom that arrives on someone else's timeline? Part of it is honest longing — we want Jesus to come back. But Wes argued it is more than wishing. Seeking the kingdom means wanting what the kingdom is, and kingdoms run on laws. America has laws; you cannot speed, you cannot steal, you go through the courts. Heaven is not the suspension of all restraint. It has its own laws, and we know it instinctively: if this country mandated some sin as the price of citizenship in good standing, every Christian would recognize the obligation to refuse.

“If we all had passports — like magic passports that said where we're truly a part of — it would all say kingdom of God.” Your national citizenship would not even be a footnote. Christ tells us to honor the rulers he has placed over us, so there is no escape clause where being a citizen of heaven puts you above the justice system. But when the two laws collide, you obey the kingdom you actually belong to.

▶ 1:30:18

Wes told a third-century story he has told the high schoolers more than once. Rome, trying to fix its social decay, decided the problem was lax religion and required everyone to be documented as having sacrificed to the pagan gods. You made your offering, an official recorded it, and you received a slip of paper. With the paper you could buy food, use the baths, be a citizen. Without it you could not participate — not a manhunt, just a slow starving-out designed to make Christians give in.

Some did, reasoning that eating matters and God would understand; they would only pretend to bow. Some got clever and paid a pagan friend to sacrifice twice and hand over the spare receipt, or forged the document outright — as if you had not still told the world you worshipped. And some did the Christian thing, asked what the kingdom of God requires, and were ostracized for it. Cut out of Roman daily life, a number of them walked out of the cities and scraped a meager living in the wilderness, because the kingdom of God mattered more than the kingdom of man. “That is what it means to seek the kingdom.” Not wishful thinking — taking God's coming reality and making it as present in your life as you can today, through the laws he has already given: prayer, generosity, love of neighbor, respect for civil authority. “So in that sense, it is an inward working of the heart” — the half of the over-spiritualized reading that was true all along, with the returning king left in the picture.

And notice, Wes added, what Luke 19 calls the people while the nobleman is away. His citizens. Jesus is not here running the governments of the world, and we are still his.

The heart behind the action

▶ 1:35:59

He prefaced the last point with a disclaimer, and it was a disarming one: if you violently disagree with me, that is fine, and please assume I communicated badly before you assume I am a crazy person.

The premise is one we already grant. Obedience is the action plus the heart behind it, which is why the man who hired out his pagan sacrifice was still sacrificing. It is the sibling holding a finger an inch from your face insisting *I'm not touching you* — technically compliant, entirely in the wrong. Wes applied it to the room without softening: if you never miss a Sunday because you want to be known as the guy who never misses a Sunday, "that is bad. Christian, stop it. I'd rather you not show up than show up with a heart intent on only self-glorification."

▶ 1:38:17

Then the harder application, and he did not soften the valuation: this is a fallen world and "the kingdoms of this world are kind of just garbage." Pick anything — our politics, the culture, the state of the church, ten straight years of declining attendance, an America that is no longer a Christian nation the way it used to be, things that used to be unacceptable and now are ordinary — and it is easy to conclude we are losing the battle. Wes was explicit that the grief is not the problem; it is not wrong to be upset that fewer people are in church. The problem is letting it take the place in your heart that seeking the kingdom should hold, because these kingdoms are shadows and ash next to the one coming down.

▶ 1:39:49

The line he drew is not indifference. "It's not that we don't care about America or how well it's doing," or about our standing in the world, or about how freely Christianity can be practiced here. It is that those things must not become idols in the heart — and the idol in question is the thought that being a good Christian means making America more Christian, until we can say we did it, we made the kingdom of God here on earth, Jesus, you can come back now. The Bible says the opposite is coming: before Christ returns, apostasy will reign and things will be terrible. And he is not summoned by consensus — he does not come back the moment every person in the world finally wants him to. "He has his own timeline." Getting fixated on what is wrong with the kingdom of this world makes us forget that it is a small fraction of what actually matters.

▶ 1:41:10

His example was Rome again, in the fourth century, on its way out. One side published and preached that Rome was falling because it had stopped worshipping the pagan gods — not pagan enough. The other side said Rome was falling because it was not Christian enough. Both tied the worship of the people to the greatness of the nation. "Maybe Rome was falling because God just let it happen." God raises up nations for his own purposes; there is no promise anywhere in Scripture that a sufficiently obedient nation will be spared war and sorrow until the kingdom comes. "America is not going to last a thousand more years if only we can just get church attendance numbers up." Imagine ending a sermon that way: a hundred extra people next Sunday or the country is doomed.

Instead — and this was the turn — it is more than enough difficulty for Christ to rule in your own life. Once you can say Christ is king in my life above everything else and you never have a single thought in

which he is not, Wes said, then go ahead and tell everyone else to get their Christ-is-king business in order, with the haughty air of a man who has figured it all out; the rest of us have more than enough to work out at home. He did not use that to excuse withdrawal. It is election season; go vote, do the things citizens get to do, care about the issues worth caring about. You can be a politician and a Christian. You can also be a politician who has made the outcome of a campaign into the hinge of the universe, so that if your candidate loses, God lost — and at that point you are seeking the kingdom of yourself. It stays a matter of the heart, because actions do not always portray what a person is actually after, and only you can audit your own heart on that one.

Whatever happens, he said, God's kingdom is true. "Christ is reigning now and he will come back again to reign here presently. And if that truth isn't in the forefront of our mind when we're interacting with the kingdom of man, then we have a heart issue that we need to fix."

What we are actually seeking

▶ 1:46:05

He ended on purpose with the vision, so that we would have something concrete to seek when the world gets us down.

> "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"
>
> REVELATION 21:1–4 ↗

At "the former things have passed away," Wes added his own gloss out loud — the things of the kingdom of this world — and finished the sentence himself: the kingdom of God has come into full fruition. We can ask the Lord Jesus to come quickly and make that kingdom a reality. And while we wait, we put on Christ daily so that his authority is an ever-present marker in our lives.

▶ 1:47:42

Then he prayed, and the prayer closed the circle back to Matthew 6. "You are king. You have authority over all the world. You raise up what you wish to raise up and you bring low what you wish to bring low. And we do not understand your ways" — the whole fourth-century argument answered in one line.

He asked for the presence of mind and the humility to seek God's ways first, for God's law, which is good, to be brought into our hearts and transform us, and then this: let it “make us not anxious for the things of this world because you told us we no longer need to be anxious, for you will provide for us and we can seek you.” That is where the message began — stop worrying, seek first the kingdom — and the last thing asked out loud was strength to seek, and a spirit of wisdom to discern how to deal with this world in a way that honors the kingdom he is bringing.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Matthew 6:31–33
- Mark 1:14–15
- Matthew 12:28
- Luke 17:20–21
- Luke 18:16–17
- Luke 19:11–15
- Revelation 21:1–4

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely is Hope Chapel's associate pastor and youth pastor, and works with the church's middle schoolers and high schoolers. Much of his teaching with them urges them to talk with their friends about Christ, on the logic that you talk about what matters most to you. He preaches from the Hope pulpit from time to time; earlier messages include Malachi (August 2025) and On the Incarnation (November 2025).

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Before this message, what came to mind when you heard the phrase "the kingdom of God"? How close was it to what Jesus seems to mean by it?
2. Matthew 6 offers seeking the kingdom as the cure for anxiety. What are you anxious about right now, and what would it look like to spend that energy seeking instead?
3. Wes said a kingdom is first of all an authority. Where in your week does some other authority actually have the final word?
4. Of the two errors — treating the kingdom as a nation to be built, or as a private inner experience — which one do you drift toward, and what does it cost you?
5. The third-century Christians who refused the sacrifice lost their place in public life. What is one law of the kingdom you could obey this week in a place where it will cost you something?

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dBz_V4b1MY&t=3881s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.