

“Timing”

Proverbs 27:1; Matthew 6:25-34; John 3:16; 1
Corinthians 10:11

What time is it?



Time is such an odd thing. It seems so concrete, yet so elusive. Scientific American once did a big special issue on the subject of time. I was intrigued (amused?) that the cover article quoted St. Augustine at length -- three times. And he lived in the fifth century AD. The truth is that everyone knows what time is until they are asked to define it. Though Einstein showed us that time is relative, we can't really conceive how that could be. We can't really conceive of an existence without time. When C.S. Lewis speaks of God existing in the Eternal Now, I sort of understand what he is trying to say, but I can't really dump all my thoughts of *before* and *after*.

The ancient Greeks had two words to describe time and both are used in the New Testament. The first, *chronos*, looks familiar and means simply the passage of time or a period of time. See, for example, Acts 1:21. The second time-oriented Greek word, *kairos*, is more interesting. In its nonbiblical use in ancient Greek, *kairos* most often refers to a decisive moment – positive or negative. *Kairos* is frequently used in the New Testament, nearly always referring to a decisive event or moment, often stressing the fact that the moment is divinely ordained.¹ For example, the people of Jerusalem do not perceive the unique *kairos* when Jesus comes to them, “. . . you did not recognize the time (*kairos* in the original Greek) of your visitation from God” (Luke 19:44). The masses fail to see the unique *kairos* present with Jesus, “Why do you not know how to interpret the present time (*kairos*)?” (Luke 12:56). They do not understand that Jesus’ ministry is a decisive moment in time, a world-changing event like no other. And the *kairos* is God’s doing.

THE *kairos* moment

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus bursts onto the scene proclaiming, “The time (*kairos*) is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). God has reached into history and grabbed humanity. It is the moment that the Jews have awaited for centuries. It is the moment that the rest of humanity has desperately needed. Later, as Simon and Andrew work on the shore, they are confronted with a very personal *kairos* moment of their own. Jesus challenges them and, in response, the two brothers simply follow. They embrace the *kairos* and will be forever changed.

The truth, as true as anything in our world, is that we live in that moment even now, for the resurrection of Jesus is the sure sign and evidence that the kingdom of God arrived in and through him. Further, it is the promise and guarantee that Jesus will return and we will all be resurrected so that we may enjoy the new heaven and earth.

It is a profound tragedy that so many in our world fail to see the truth; they misapprehend the genuine nature of objective reality and fall into the “you only live once (YOLO)” trap. For this YOLO view of reality is simply mistaken; we enjoy our present lives—and we will experience a life-after-death—and we will be resurrected to a newly embodied life-after-life-after-death. Yes, it is true. The proof is Jesus’ own resurrection.

Worry?

Little wonder then that Jesus tells us not to worry. The world operates on one level, YOLO, and Jesus wants us to live, abundantly, on another. Even in the worst of times, the loss of someone we love dearly, that loss is only for a time, for death does not hold us.

¹ from Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged by Bromiley.

For too long I didn't pay attention to the last verses, Matt. 6:33-34, in Jesus' instructions to not worry. "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." I paid little attention, despite this verse being the climax of the whole section. In the preceding verses, Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the **priority** in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. In the Greek, "strive" is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for-someday coming of God's kingdom (standing around looking at the clouds) but about its reality today, living in the kingdom, now.

The Kingdom of God

When Jesus says, "strive first for the kingdom of God," what is he talking about? It is a lot less abstract than you probably think and, no, it isn't a place in your heart. The kingdom of God is a matter of geography. It is the place where God is king. The Jews of Jesus' day waited for the coming of this kingdom – an actual kingdom. When God again reigned, there would be no war, no hunger, no hatred, no sick, no crippled, no blind . . . and the Jews had waited for a long time.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' very first words are a blazing proclamation:

"The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent! And believe in the Good News!"

Wow. Jesus brings the news that the wait is over, that God is doing great things, that God's kingdom is at hand, that the Day of the Lord has come . . . that all of this is breaking in upon Israel through the ministry of Jesus himself. God's glory was shining upon them all and the world would never be the same.

Of course, this seems an odd claim to make. Evil was then and is still a present reality. There is simply too much pain and suffering in the world to suggest otherwise. So again, how could Jesus proclaim the coming of God's kingdom or tell us to strive for it?

Richard Hays answers such questions this way, "Why do the powers of wickedness continue to operate effectively in this world? Because the story is not over. The climactic victory has been won on the Cross, but there is still much residual resistance. So we live in a tension-filled interval where skirmishes are still under way." The kingdom of God is present, but not fully. We are to strive to live as if God's kingdom is fully present, leading lives of righteousness, loving God and loving neighbor. From this will flow our heart's true desire.

D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: "This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one's existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one's heart." Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God's rule in our hearts?

The kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Thus, experiencing the rule of God in our hearts is a bit like this. I am a citizen of the United States. I try as best as I can to live according to the laws of the U.S. If I move to another country, even a lawless country, I can still choose to hold the laws of the U.S. in my heart, to be governed by them even though I am no longer in the U.S. Thus, even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God's law. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God's moral will, for that is true righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount is an extended block of Jesus' teachings about the nature of God's will for our lives, about what it means to be righteous, to do right in God's sight.

Needs and wants

Jesus says if we strive first for God's kingdom, then "all these things will be given to you as well." What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31). Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of

bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn't speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, *Moët Chandon*, and designer clothes.

We have a way of making "wants" into seeming "needs." To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need "is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want," leading to "a blurring of needs and wants." The result is what he calls the "tyranny of the unnecessary."

If we are going to find our way to the abundant life that Jesus promises and desires for us, we must begin by recognizing that our own desires are misplaced. Too often, we seek the things of this world, whether it be stuff or status, rather than the things of God. Our journey must begin with the transformation of our minds and hearts, our desires and dreams. By the grace of God, such transformation can be ours.

Transformation of our whole selves (Romans 12:1-2) includes the transformation of our understanding of reality. The arrival of God's kingdom in and through Jesus was not just a matter of the heart, but a manifest truth of our world. I've learned that every time I talk about this, the next question goes something like this: *But if the kingdom of God was ushered in by Jesus, why is there still sin and death in the world?*

Jesus came talking about fulfillment of the Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom. In God's kingdom there are no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, some did. In the years immediately after Jesus' resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. It's as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn't really the Messiah, hence the world still awaited the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Already/Not yet

Jesus' disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God's anointed had indeed come. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish perspective. In the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come -- but not yet in all its fullness. The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived "between times" when God's kingdom had come already, but not yet—fully. I really can't overemphasize how important to our reading of the NT is our understanding of this "already/not yet" perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the "ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10:11), he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . . and, truly, so are we!

As Gordon Fee wrote, we are empowered by God's Spirit to live the life of the future, of God's kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul's phrase, "ambassadors for Christ," carrying God's message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sake but for the sake of all the world.

Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). First UMC is just such a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. It may take the butterfly a while to comprehend its own rebirth. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don't always act like new creations. But we are. *This is the real world.*