

Intro

We are continuing with our journey of the Sermon of the Mount. Last week we looked at the characteristics or the virtues of the people who are to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and this week Jesus gives us an further introduction of where his teaching stands in relation to the teaching that the Jews had already known: i.e. the Law and the Prophets, also together called the Hebrew Bible.

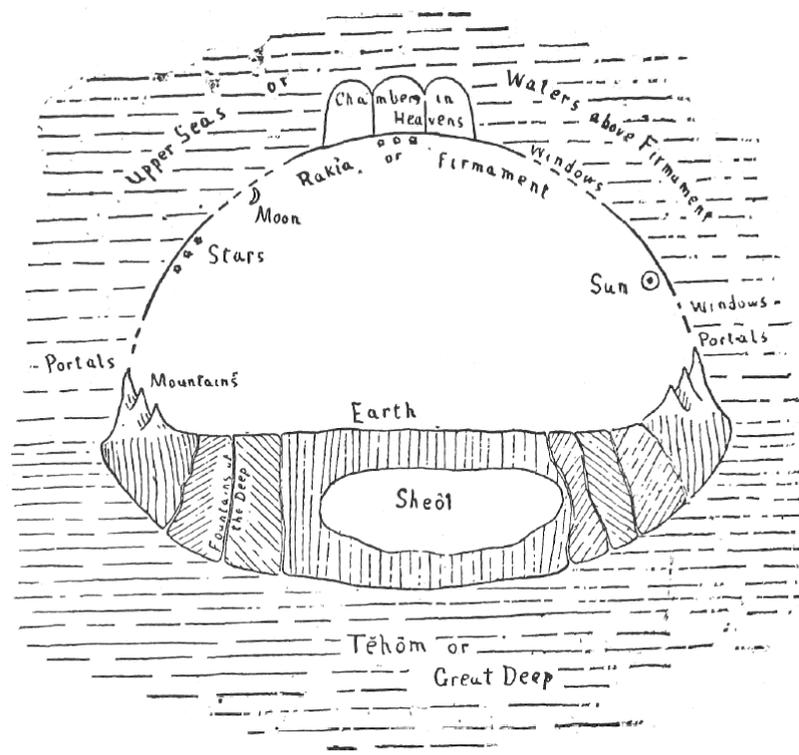
Kingdom of Heaven

What do you think about heaven? What does it look like? We all, regardless of religion, are looking for a place that is better than where we live now. Especially in this time of corona virus, global warming and climate change, pollution and overpopulation, we desire to be in a place where everything is right and well. You may see yourself on an island in the Indian Ocean lying on a sunbed with a Pina Colada. Or you may see yourself in a place worshipping God all day long, as we sometimes see in Revelations. But, I am sure that many of you do not like Pina Collada or think that to worship God all day long may be quite boring! Some of you would like dogs in Heaven and then others would like not to see them at all! There is no illness, no hardship, no toil. It sounds like Paradise... but even in Paradise Adam was called to work. We have been created to do things, to create things, and even in a short holiday you want to go out and do things, because lying on sun lounger gets old, pretty quickly!

Heaven in the Bible

So what is Heaven then in the Bible?

It is simply the place where God is. The following is a diagram of what in Biblical times the Israelites saw the universe:



The world is relatively flat and under the world is Sheol (what we now call hell) and above the moon, planets and stars is heaven, where God lives. All surrounded by water. But in its simplest form heaven just mean “the skies”. And it is above the skies that God lives according to Biblical thought.

Kingdom of Heaven

But if that is heaven, what is then the Kingdom of Heaven? Matthew uses this phrase 32 times in his Gospel. He also uses the phrase Kingdom of God (5x), Kingdom of the Father (3x), The Kingdom (8x) and The Kingdom of Jesus or the Kingdom of the Son of Man (8x). All of these are synonyms of each other. In the Kingdom of Heaven phrase, heaven does not mean the place of God’s dwelling, but it means where God rules, where his reign is. Matthew uses heaven, as, as a Jew, he was uncomfortable using the name of God (YHWH) as this is holy. So, he uses the word Heaven to indicate the same meaning: The Kingdom of God.

Where is then Kingdom of Heaven? Well, Jesus give the answer for that to: in Matthew 4:17 his call to the people is “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near”. It must be, as Jesus is God and where God is there is his Kingdom. But not everyone is in the Kingdom of Heaven. Logically, those who did not repent, are not in the Kingdom. In the beatitudes those who are poor in spirit or persecuted because righteousness are in the Kingdom of Heaven and in this passage we read today, Jesus is saying to the people that that unless their righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees (The Ministers and Priests of the Church) then then will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. That is a stark message. Who will then enter the Kingdom of God?

The Law

Jesus puts the bar high. The Jews had already many difficulties living according to the law, and the Pharisees were famous for codifying life in such a way that as long as you lived according to their rules and regulations you did not break the law, and therefore you can go to the Kingdom of Heaven. For the Pharisees the Law and the Prophets were central to live a life to please God. But Jesus challenges the Pharisees as we will see in the rest of his sermon, as what is important for him it is not following the letter of the rules, but what is in our hearts, as in Hosea 6:6 ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings’. God has given the law to people out of mercy. If you live according to these rules then you live well.

The summary of the law is to love God above all and to love the people around us as ourselves.

The citizens of the Kingdom

Who are then in the Kingdom of God? Those who break the last of the commandments and teaches the same will be the least in the Kingdom and those who practice and teaches all the commands will be regarded great in the Kingdom. Following the law is very important. And following the law in the right way is very important. Not like the Pharisees who taught that if followed the letter of the law and their interpretations you are OK. No, Jesus puts the bar higher. So, it is not only those who murder who will be judged, but also those who are angry with another.

In order to enter the Kingdom of God we are judged. And this judgement is very important. How will we be judged? Have we loved God above all, have we loved the people around us as ourselves?

Therefore those who live according to God's law are in the Kingdom of God, as they do what God wants them to do.

Atonement

But you may say, this is impossible. No one can then enter the Kingdom of God! And you would be right. However, the Jewish Law has a complicated system of sacrifices by which each person could atone for when broke the law. For instance Leviticus 5:17-19:

17 'If anyone sins and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands, even though they do not know it, they are guilty and will be held responsible.
18 They are to bring to the priest as a guilt offering a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for them for the wrong they have committed unintentionally, and they will be forgiven. 19 It is a guilt offering; they have been guilty of wrongdoing against the LORD.'

And Leviticus is full of this kind of regulations of atonement. You do something wrong, you pay a suitable price and then you are forgiven.

So in the Law, there is a method of making amends. And those who made amends are forgiven. But as I do not have many goats, I need to live in such a way that I do not have to make atonement.

Mercy

Jesus speaks here before his own sacrifice on the cross. But knowing that he will do this. And the dangers for those of us who love Jesus is that we can take his mercy for granted. We can skip from the sin to the forgiveness, but we do not make a tally of all the goats we have to sacrifice as we are forgiven anyway.

And that makes us sloppy. We could be tempted just live life as we wanted to, knowing that Jesus will forgive us. But if we love God, love Jesus, then we know that every time we are forgiven he substitutes our payment. That every time we do wrong, we need to see him on the cross, and have an understanding of the price that he paid on the cross for us.

Because for God, the Law and the Prophets are unchanged and valid. Jesus' death has not taken the law away, what it has taken away is that we need to pay. But we still need to ask for forgiveness. It is not automatic. And Jesus still wants us to live according to this law. Ideally he does not want us to break the law at all! So we need to know it, and live according to it, as best we can, and know it so that we realise also when we break it and therefore need to ask for forgiveness.

Jesus paid the price for sin, but the law still exists, and therefore sin still exists and we still are judged by the way we live and we still need to recognise our own sinfulness and need for forgiveness on a daily basis. So that we can be forgiven and be part of the Kingdom again.

Conclusion

The Kingdom of Heaven is very important in Matthew as the Kingdom is where God rules. We noted that the Kingdom of Heaven is near, where we are, not somewhere in heaven, unobtainable for us. That the law and the prophets are the guidelines for living in the Kingdom, and that those who do not live according to the law and the prophets are not in the Kingdom. That in order to come into the Kingdom we have to repent from not loving God above all and not loving those around us as ourselves. We learned that we can make atonement and then we are forgiven and can re-enter the Kingdom. We also realised that Jesus on the cross has made atonement for us already, but the law is still there: we need to know it, live according to it as this is God's will for us, and ask for forgiveness if we break it.

Is that too much for us? Can we live in that way? Yes, we can, as after Jesus died he send his Holy Spirit to live in us, and grow us and teach us the law and convict us of sin. We call this sanctification. Jeremiah 31:33 says:

This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,' declares the LORD.
'I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

This is one of the things that the Holy Spirit does in us: He writes God's law on our minds and in our hearts, so that God will be our God and we will be his people.

But God still calls us to live according to his law. Are you willing to do that?

Amen.