



## Where Is the Kingdom of Heaven?

By John La Boone

*"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter." – Matthew 7:21*

There are a number of phrases from the Bible that we encounter all the time but they are not usually explained and not explored in depth by most people. Many of them probably had an easily understood meaning to their original audiences, but that meaning has become obscure with the passing of the centuries. One of my favorites is "the kingdom of heaven."

Now, growing up as a Baptist I thought I knew what those words meant. I thought that if someone (1) believes in God and (2) leads a pretty moral life and (3) repents when they sin, they will, upon death, go to heaven which is a place close to God where people live in everlasting bliss, never to experience sadness, loss or any kind of trouble or challenge ever again. All that plus you get wings and a golden harp. That belief has certainly not been restricted to Baptists. It seems to have been widespread among modern Christians. Well, the gaining of a golden harp may not have been universally believed but you get the idea. So that's it. You just live as you were taught in Sunday school how to live, and then you die, and then

you go on to glorious happiness for ever and ever – the kingdom of heaven! But is that what Jesus meant when he spoke about the kingdom of heaven?

First of all, “the kingdom of heaven” is the phrase found in the Gospel of Matthew. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke the terminology is “the kingdom of God.” The Gospel of John does not use either phrase. The kingdom of God occurs 68 times in 10 books of the New Testament, whereas the kingdom of heaven occurs 32 times and only in Matthew. Bible scholars have looked at possible differences in meaning but most now believe that both phrases probably refer to the same concept and can be used interchangeably.

Another way of looking at what Jesus may have meant by the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is that when one accepts universal love for all people and all of creation as the only basis for living a good life, an inner transformation of a radical revolutionary nature will take place in that person. All ideas, desires and actions will be adjusted and the person will let go of the old life and live primarily for the love of God and humanity. In that way, the kingdom of heaven would begin immediately right here on earth rather than after death. This is an idea that intrigues me more and more when it comes to thinking about heaven, especially about heaven as a transformation.

That sort of spirituality seems to have something in common with the Buddhist primary belief that human suffering and everything that distracts from any sort of kingdom of heaven comes from our attachments – which includes not only material things but also people, places, conditions, relationships, nationality, public image, Facebook status, health, looks, etc. When we have something that we value, we may live in fear of losing it, or we may believe we have to defend it, or we may have to protect ourselves from the realization that it is not what it seems to be. When we don’t have a desired thing, we may feel just as attached to it in an urgent longing for it and possibly in striving to gain it. When we envy, we believe that someone else has something that is rightfully ours so we are attached to it psychologically and frustrated that we don’t possess it.

The Buddhists believe, among other things, that it is possible to transcend all that and reach a state of enlightenment in which a person becomes

acutely tuned in to universal love and is then freed from the pain and trouble of this world – all of which starts to sound rather like the kingdom of heaven. It is not mere coincidence that the great religions of the world have arrived at many of the same truths. I just can't help but wonder if instead of meaning that we go to another realm after death, Jesus may have been simply saying that we need to trade in an attachment-driven way of life for a single goal of living simply, lovingly, thankfully, unselfishly and totally in the moment. All this is quite separate from any teachings Jesus gave about the afterlife. I don't mean that Jesus did not teach that there is life after death. I just wonder if he was referring to what is possible here and now during our earthly lives when he spoke to people in those Gospel passages about the kingdom of heaven. After all,



he was well known for encouraging new, bold and even radical approaches to life and behavior. There's a lot to think about there.

With all this in mind, I recently learned about a wonderful ministry of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Corpus Christi, Texas called "Access Plus" that

devotes itself to building high-quality, custom-made wheelchair ramps for handicapped people free of charge. The people who do this seem to derive enormous joy from their mission and they describe it as "kingdom work." Everything is done by volunteers, sometimes including people from other churches or other individuals who just want to make a difference to somebody in need. They meet once a month for the builds, and after 17 years and hundreds of ramps, they are still going strong.

St. Mark's came into being in 1986 and right from the beginning they decided to dedicate 10 percent of their parish income to outreach. Today that gives them about \$40,000 to do good works in general with. There have also been donations and grants given specifically to Access Plus. The materials for each ramp cost anywhere for \$150 to \$600, and of course the labor is free. They have an engineer in the congregation who custom designs each ramp and the veteran volunteer builders train new

volunteers on the job. One good thing leads to another. For example, there was a local Catholic church that learned from the St. Mark's volunteers and created their own ramp-building ministry. And a Rotary Club sent a team to learn how to make ramps, and now they build 10 high-quality ramps each year for people with mobility challenges who cannot pay for one. There's no competition and no claiming credit. No exclusivity of any kind. Helping people is all that matters. The more, the merrier. That's how it works in the kingdom of heaven.



It all started when the Rev. John Hardie became rector of St. Mark's in 1999. He was having coffee one day with parishioner Dik Johnson who had lost his legs due to a spinal defect, and he asked him if he thought there were wheelchair-bound people in Corpus Christi who had access problems with their homes but could not afford to have ramps installed. "He looked at me like I had two heads and said, 'Of course,'" Hardie recalled. "It was just a Holy Spirit moment, when both of us felt that God's asking us to do this."

They enlisted another parishioner, the engineer, plus others who had experience in working on Habitat for Humanity builds. In no time they became experts in building ramps that are safe, easy to use, constructed to high standards, and built to last. All the cutting and constructing happens at the recipient's home. The rule of thumb is it takes one foot for ramp for every inch of vertical drop. There has to be a horizontal



section at the doorway and also in the middle if the ramp requires a turn. Plus, there is a piece of galvanized steel attached to the end where the ramp meets the ground.

Corpus Christi has a population of more than 300,000 people and the need for access ramps is very big. Access Plus has a waiting list that



usually has 30 names on it at any given time. A wide variety of people need this sort of help. Recent recipients include a man who lost both legs above the knees, an elderly couple who both use walkers, a girl struggling with multiple sclerosis, and a child with brain cancer. There was also a woman who had lost one leg and without a ramp she resorted to an elaborate and very difficult routine to get into her home, which involved pushing her body out of her wheelchair and positioning herself backward halfway into her doorway, falling inside and then dragging the wheelchair, with considerable difficulty, in after her. The whole procedure was difficult, painful, dangerous and undignified. Everything was even harder in darkness, bad weather or when the person was sick. "A mere 4-inch step may not seem like a challenge to an able-bodied person, but to some people it is," commented Doug Wayland, the ministry's current coordinator.



But because of the volunteers of Access Plus, the kingdom of heaven has come closer to that lady and quite a few other people in south Texas. That includes the recipients and the givers. Everybody gets a blessing. It's a whole other way of doing things but that's how it works in the kingdom of heaven.

To see a short video on the work of Access Plus, click on this link: <https://www.stmarksgcc.com/access-plus>

*Eternal God, in whose perfect kingdom no strength is known but the strength of compassion for all of humanity: infuse us with your Spirit, that all peoples may be gathered under the banner of love and peace, as children of one merciful Creator; to whom we give praise and glory, now and for ever. Amen.*