

THE MEDIATORIAL KINGDOM AND SALVATION

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There is wide agreement that the kingdom and salvation themes are linked throughout the NT. The Gospels display this link in their many statements concerning entrance into the kingdom. Matthew 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 18:8–9 (cf. Mark 9:43, 45, 47); 19:14 (cf. Mark 10:14–15; Luke 18:16–17); 19:16–30 (cf. Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30); 23:13; and John 3:5 state how one can enter the future kingdom. There must be repentance and faith in Jesus as Messiah and Savior with a resulting righteousness if one will experience the future kingdom. The NT Epistles reflect this same understanding as they speak of those who will inherit the kingdom. Finally, the book of Revelation demonstrates that genuine believers who are called overcomers will experience the blessings of the kingdom and the eternal state. Thus, the NT clearly demonstrates that it is the saved who will enter the mediatorial kingdom when it is established on the earth.

Introduction

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, 5).¹ With these words to Nicodemus, Jesus declared the inseparable link between regeneration and entrance into the kingdom of God. This linkage of the kingdom and salvation themes in the Bible is a well-established fact recognized by authors from a variety of theological perspectives. Goldsworthy, an amillennial covenantalist, writes, “That which believers possess by faith, the regeneration for us in Christ, becomes that which begins to be formed in them. At the return of Christ the regeneration of believers is completed, and the whole creation is renewed. The kingdom of God, first revealed

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the NAU, 1995.

in Eden, is consummated for eternity.”² Dispensational premillennialist, McClain, states, “The discourse which follows, dealing with Himself as the Bread of Life [i.e. John 6:32–51], was not intended to be a denial of the importance of physical life and its needs, but rather to indicate the supremacy of spiritual matters above all else in the Kingdom of the Messiah.”³ Ladd, a historic premillennialist, notes, “When we ask about the content of this new realm of blessing, we discover that *basileia* means not only the dynamic reign of God and the realm of salvation; it is also used to designate the gift of life and salvation The Kingdom of God stands as a comprehensive term for all that the messianic salvation included.”⁴ Promise premillennialist, Kaiser, concludes, “The kingdom of God is both a soteriological as well as an eschatological concept.”⁵ Finally, the mainstream Presbyterian OT scholar Bright remarks, “. . . while the complexity of the Bible is by no means to be minimized, there nevertheless runs through it a unifying theme which is not artificially imposed. It is the theme of redemption, of salvation; and it is caught up particularly in those concepts which revolve around the idea of the people of God, called to live under his rule, and the concomitant hope of the coming Kingdom of God.”⁶

Even though these writers, and many others like them, have disagreements on the definition of the kingdom of God, there is wide agreement that these two biblical themes of the kingdom and salvation are interrelated. This article will seek to demonstrate what the relationship is between the “Kingdom” and “Salvation” themes in the NT.⁷ In the following discussion, the term “Kingdom” will refer to the mediatorial kingdom. McClain defines the mediatorial kingdom as “(a) the rule of God through divinely chosen representatives who not only speaks and acts for God but also represents people before God; (b) a rule which has especial reference

² Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 232.

³ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 287.

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 70.

⁵ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Recovering the Unity of the Bible: One Continuous Story, Plan, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2009), 140.

⁶ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 10.

⁷ This article does not address the issue of the continuity/discontinuity of salvation from OT to NT. A foundational summary statement of the contemporary dispensational viewpoint can be found in Elliott Johnson, “Salvation, Dispensational View Of,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology: A Practical Guide to the People, Viewpoints, and History of Prophetic Studies*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 388. A more detailed dispensational discussion of OT salvation is John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, eds. J. S. & P. D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 39–77. Two articles that show that covenantalists and dispensationalists agree that salvation has always been by faith while discussing other differences are Fred H. Klooster, “The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 131–60, and Alan P. Ross, “The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 161–78.

to the earth; and (c) having as its mediatorial ruler one who is always a member of the human race.”⁸ The mediatorial kingdom is to be contrasted with the universal kingdom, the direct rule of God from heaven over all His creation.⁹ Through creation originally, and now through physical birth, all of mankind is and will be under the universal rule of God. This is in contrast to the spiritual rebirth that is necessary for one to enter the mediatorial kingdom (John 3:3, 5).

The Words of Jesus Concerning Entrance into the Kingdom

Introduction

The writers of the Gospels include statements of Jesus concerning how one entered the kingdom. The following chart summarizes these statements.

Chart 1 – Jesus’ Requirements for Entrance into the Kingdom

<i>Passage(s)</i>	<i>Requirement</i>	<i>Term(s) for “Kingdom”</i>
Matt 5:20	Righteousness Surpassing Scribes & Pharisees	The Kingdom of Heaven
Matt 7:21	Doing the Will of the Father	The Kingdom of Heaven
Matt 18:3	Converted (Turned) & Become like Children	The Kingdom of Heaven
Matt 18:8–9 Mark 9:43 Mark 9:45 Mark 9:47	Cut off Hand & Foot Pluck out Eye Cut off Hand Cut off Foot Throw out Eye	Life Life Life Life The Kingdom of God
Matt 19:14 Mark 10:14–15 Luke 18:16–17	Receive the Kingdom like a Child Receive the Kingdom like a Child Receive the Kingdom like a Child	The Kingdom of Heaven The Kingdom of God The Kingdom of God

⁸ McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 41.

⁹ McClain (Ibid., 22–36) lists seven characteristics of the universal kingdom: (1) It exists without interruption through all time (Ps 145:13); (2) It includes all that exists in space and time (1 Chron 29:12); (3) The divine control it generally providential (Ps 148:18); (4) The divine control may be exercised at times by supernatural means (Dan 6:27); (5) It always exists efficaciously regardless of the attitude of its subjects (Dan 4:35); (6) Its rule is administered through the eternal Son (Col 1:17); and (7) It is not exactly identical with that kingdom for which our Lord taught His disciples to pray (cf. Ps 103:19; Matt 6:10).

Matt 19:16–30	Sell all & Follow Jesus (Hard for a Rich Man)	Eternal Life Life The Kingdom of Heaven The Kingdom of God The Perfect The Saved The Regeneration
Mark 10:17–31	Sell all & Follow Jesus (Hard for a Rich Man)	Eternal Life The Kingdom of God The Age to Come
Luke 18:18–30	Sell all & Follow Jesus (Hard for a Rich Man)	Eternal Life The Kingdom of God The Saved The Age to Come
Matt 23:13	[People Shut off]	The Kingdom of Heaven
John 3:3, 5	Born of Water & the Spirit	The Kingdom of God

What follows is an exposition of each of these rows of sayings concerning entrance into the Kingdom.

Matthew 5:20

The Context: The gospel of Matthew emphasizes the kingship of Jesus and the kingdom program of God.¹⁰ The book begins with the clear demonstration that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the OT based upon His genealogy (1:1–17) and the events associated with His birth and childhood which fulfilled OT Scripture (1:18–2:23). But not only was Jesus “born King of the Jews” (2:2), He was also named Jesus, i.e. ‘the Lord is salvation,’ because “He will save His people from their sins” (1:21). Thus, Jesus was both Messiah and Savior.

With the public appearance of John the Baptist, the kingdom program of God is introduced in Matthew. The essence of John’s preaching was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2). The call for repentance implied that the Israelites needed a spiritual conversion for entrance into the kingdom that was approaching. The religious leaders of Israel, in particular, needed to change their minds from thinking that descent from Abraham guaranteed their participation in the imminent kingdom and to confess their sins, showing the reality of their conversion in changed lives that conformed to God’s righteous standards (3:6–9). Then, in response to His obedience in being baptized by John, Jesus received the Holy Spirit and the Father declared that Jesus was His beloved Son in whom He was well-pleased (3:13–17; cf. Ps 2:7; Isa 42:1). Further, Jesus displayed this divine Sonship and submission to the Father by withstanding the testing of the devil in the

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of the purpose and structure of the gospel of Matthew, see S. Lewis Johnson, Jr, “The Argument of Matthew,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 112, No. 2 (April–June, 1955): 143–53.

wilderness (4:1–11). This compliance with the will of God proved that Jesus was qualified as the Messiah to rule over God’s kingdom (4:8–10).

After John the Baptist was imprisoned (4:12–13), Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the same message as John, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (4:17). The first specific event that Matthew narrates from Jesus’ Galilean ministry is the call of four disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John (4:18–22). These four men responded to the authority of the Messiah, having previously repented of their sins and believed in Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29–42). They followed Jesus and became learners of His teaching.

With this background, Matthew records Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, His discourse to teach His disciples (5:1–7:29). In the introduction to the sermon, Jesus described the character of the disciples and their place in the coming kingdom (5:3–12). They had received divine favor, “blessed are you” (5:11). This favor from God meant that they already were identified with the kingdom that God will establish in the future upon the earth (5:3, 10). When the future kingdom comes, they will experience their rewards for their present faithfulness (5:4–9). Toussaint states two conclusions concerning the beatitudes, “First, it will be noted that each of the beatitudes is pronounced on one who processes a certain spiritual quality. This indicates that entrance into the kingdom is based on one’s spiritual condition. Second, the basis of each blessing in every case is a reference to some phase of Jewish kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament.”¹¹ Jesus concluded the introduction to the sermon by describing the calling and position of His disciples in the present age as salt and light (5:13–16).

The body of the sermon was the declaration by Jesus of the righteousness that needed to characterize His disciples (5:17–7:12). Jesus began by stating His relationship to the OT (5:17–20).¹² He needed to do this because in 5:20–7:12 He would present His instruction which was in stark contrast with the teaching of the Pharisees which the disciples had previously received.¹³ Jesus made it clear that He had not come to abolish the OT, but to fulfill it (5:17–18). There were fulfillments of the OT in Jesus’ first coming and other fulfillments to be associated with His second coming and His mediatorial kingdom. Thus, every disciple needed to be a student of the OT and follow its properly understood instruction which Jesus gave in 5:21–48. It follows that disciples (heirs of the kingdom) who break the

¹¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: Studies in Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 96. Toussaint (*Ibid.*, 67, 96–97) articulates the OT prophecies of the Jewish kingdom referred to in the Matthean beatitudes thusly: (1) inheritance of the kingdom of heaven (5:3, 10; cf. Dan 2:44; 4:26; 7:27); (2) comfort (5:4; cf. Isa 66:13); (3) inheritance of the earth (5:5; cf. Ps 2:8–9; 37:11); (4) filled with righteousness (5:6; cf. (Isa 45:8; 61:10–11; 62:1–2; Jer 23:6; 33:14–16; Dan 9:24); (5) receive mercy (5:7; cf. Isa 49:10, 13; 54:8, 10; 60:10; Zech 10:6); (6) see God (5:8; cf. Ps 24:3–4; Isa 33:17; 35:2); and (7) called sons of God (5:9; cf. Hos 1:10).

¹² David L. Turner (*Matthew*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008], 162) states, “To Matthew’s Christian Jewish audience, ‘good works’ (5:16) would imply righteous works . . . enjoined by the law and the prophets. Thus, Jesus’s relationship to the Hebrew Bible must not be misunderstood. . . . The mention of the law and the prophets here and the summary statement of 7:12 is an *inclusio*, or framework, that brings the main body of the sermon full circle.”

¹³ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Matthew* (London: Elliot Stock, 1909), 75.

commandments and teach others to do so also will suffer a loss of status when the kingdom is established (5:19).

The Verse: Jesus confronted His disciples with a stern warning, “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). Jesus was not speaking here of status in the kingdom, but of entrance itself into the kingdom. The scribes were students of the OT law who interpreted it in accordance with Jewish oral tradition. A summary and codification of this interpretation was later collected (ca. A.D. 200) in *The Mishnah*.¹⁴ The Pharisees sought to scrupulously observe the letter of the law as interpreted by the scribes and to teach others to do so also. However, as Jesus demonstrated in 5:21–48, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was only an outward obedience that came not from the inner man and thus neglected the real, spiritual meaning of the commandments.¹⁵ To enter the kingdom, the disciples needed changed hearts which would result in lives characterized first by an inner compulsion to obey, followed by observable actions of obedience to God’s standards. In this way, they were to be perfect (i.e. “complete,” “mature”) as was God their Father (5:48). This was the righteousness that “surpassed” that of the scribes and Pharisees. This was the kind of righteousness necessary to enter the mediatorial kingdom.

Matthew 7:21

The Context: After the body of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed His disciples with exhortations to follow Him completely and warned of the dire consequences if they did not (7:13–29). Turner describes the contrast Jesus presented as one between discipleship (following Jesus and His teachings) and lawlessness (a refusal to follow Jesus and His teachings) and provides a helpful chart of the structure adapted below:¹⁶

Chart 2: The Contrast of Matthew 7:13–23

<i>Matthew 7</i>	<i>Discipleship</i>	<i>Lawlessness</i>
Two gates/ways (7:13–14)	Narrow gate Difficult way Life Few	Wide gate Broad way Destruction Many

¹⁴ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes*. Reprint (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), xiii–xvii.

¹⁵ This was the same kind of “righteousness” that Paul wrote of that characterized his pre-conversion life (Phil 3:6). From his converted perspective, Paul was able to acknowledge that this personal righteousness derived from keeping the law according the Pharisees’ interpretation was insufficient for salvation. Salvation, rather, came from “not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil 3:9).

¹⁶ Turner, *Matthew*, 213–14.

Two trees/fruits (7:15–23)	True prophets (implied) Sheep Good trees Good fruit (grapes, figs) Life (implied) Doing the Father’s will	False prophets Wolves Bad trees (thorns, thistles) Bad fruit Judgment (fire) Saying, “Lord, Lord…”
Two builders/foundations (7:24–27)	Wise person Hears/obeys Jesus House built on rock House stands during flood	Foolish person Hears/does not obey Jesus House built on sand House falls during flood

The Verse: In Matthew 7:21, Jesus contrasted those who will enter from those who will not enter the kingdom. He said, “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.” Jesus had just warned of false prophets who will come and given the criteria by which the disciples can discern them (7:15–20). It is these false prophets who seem to be primarily in view in 7:21–23 as those whom Christ never knew who practiced lawlessness, and so will not be allowed to enter the kingdom. However, their judgment was a sober warning to any who were self-deceived as to how one entered the kingdom. In 7:21, two characteristics (the first implied and the second explicit) were presented of heirs of the kingdom. First, true disciples of Jesus have a personal relationship with Him. In the future day, they will be among those who will say, “Lord, Lord.” They will profess then because they already profess the lordship (deity and authority) of Jesus. They will be the ones whom Jesus knew. Second, unlike the self-deceived, their actions, doing the will of the Father, will demonstrate that their faith in Jesus was genuine and thus they will enter the kingdom when it is established upon the earth. As in Matthew 5:20, Jesus declared that true righteousness (doing the will of God from the heart) fitted one to belong in the kingdom.

Matthew 18:3

The Context: Following His narration of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew describes the Galilean ministry of Jesus to demonstrate His Messianic authority (8:1–10:4). Then Jesus commissioned His twelve disciples to go throughout Galilee proclaiming, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (10:5–11:1). However, the response of Galilee to the message of Jesus and His disciples was opposition (11:2–12:50). This led to Jesus giving His parables of the kingdom of heaven and never again was the kingdom declared to be imminent by Jesus (13:1–53). Rather, Jesus withdrew from the multitude to spend time with His disciples and to confirm their faith in Him as Messiah. Upon their confession of faith, Jesus began to tell the disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to die (13:54–17:27). While going to Jerusalem, the disciples asked Jesus, “Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of

heaven?" (18:1). Jesus gave His answer with further teaching and illustrations in 18:2–19:2.

The Verse: After setting a child in the midst of His disciples, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (18:3). Turner gives insight into the meaning of Jesus' words here:

He [Jesus] says no one will enter the kingdom unless one turns from sin and becomes like a child. Jesus does not choose a child out of a sentimental notion of innocence or a subjective humility of children, since children may already exhibit in seed form the traits that Jesus speaks against here. The childlike character trait that is foremost in the simile of becoming like a child is humility. In this sense, conversion entails a radical change amounting to the renunciation of all one's human prestige and acceptance of kingdom values. Children are not innocent or selfless, nor do they consistently model humility. Rather, children have no status in society; they are at the mercy of adults. Similarly, repentant disciples admit that they have no status before God and that they depend on the love of the heavenly Father.¹⁷

Jesus went on to add that humility was not only necessary to enter the kingdom, but it was the requirement for eminence in His kingdom when it will be established on the earth (18:4).

Matthew 18:8–9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47

The Context: Matthew continues to relate Jesus' discourse to His disciples. Jesus counseled His disciples to receive childlike believers and warns of the severe judgment that will come to one who does not and causes the believer to stumble (18:5–6). The "woe" of verse 7 is directed against those of this world who would seek to cause believers to sin. That Christ's disciples would be attacked by opponents of the kingdom was inevitable, but the stumbling blocks will reap the consequence of great punishment from God because of their human responsibility for their despicable actions. These words of "woe" here anticipate Jesus' future words of "woe" directed against the Pharisees (cf. Matt 23:13, 33) and Judas (cf. Matt 26:24). The gospel of Mark also records in an abbreviated form this instruction of Jesus to His disciples (9:42–48). It too begins with Jesus' words concerning stumbling blocks (9:42).

The Verses: After speaking of outside stumbling blocks, both Matthew and Mark record Jesus' words to His disciples that they might become internal stumbling blocks to themselves. Matthew states, "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into eternal fire. If your eye

¹⁷ Turner, *Matthew*, 435–36.

causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell” (18:8–9). Significantly, Mark 9:47 substitutes the words “kingdom of God” for “life” in the saying concerning the eye. This demonstrates that when Matt 18:8–8 and Mark 9:43, 45 speak of “life” that this is a synonym for “kingdom of God.”

Again, Turner gives insight into these verses in Matthew:

Failure to deal radically with sinful proclivities indicates that one is in danger of punishment in hellfire (cf. 3:10–12; 5:22; 25:41). As grotesque as these images of amputation and gouging are, the prospect of eternal punishment is far worse. This language is hypothetical as well as hyperbolic (cf. 5:29–30). Ridding oneself of one’s hands, feet, and eyes would not reach the root of sin, the heart (15:18–20). The point is, rather, that one must deal radically with one’s sinful tendencies (cf. Prov. 4:23–27; Rom. 13:11–14).¹⁸

Conversion (18:3) demonstrated by a “righteous” lifestyle was necessary to avoid eternal punishment in hell and enter into life, the kingdom of God. This is the thrust of Jesus’ words recorded here.

Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:14–15; Luke 18:16–17

The Context: Each of the first three gospels record an incident as Jesus and His disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem. As babies were brought to Jesus for His touch and prayer, His disciples rebuked those bringing them. When Jesus saw what was taking place, He was indignant and again used children as an illustration of those who will enter the kingdom.

The Verses: Matthew records Jesus’ words in this way, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (19:14). Here, as in 18:3, children illustrate the humble ones to who will enter the kingdom. Toussaint points out, “The Evangelist [Matthew] uses the character of children to sharply contrast the distinction between their faith and humility and Israel’s unbelief and blindness.”¹⁹

Matthew 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30

The Context: Immediately after the previous event of Jesus receiving the children, each of the first three gospels narrate the interaction of Jesus with a young man who asked what he needed to do to obtain eternal life. After the interchange, when the man went away grieving, Jesus used the occasion to give further instruction to His disciples concerning entrance into the kingdom. Thus, these passages are the longest and most detailed in the Synoptic Gospels concerning the interrelationship between the themes of the kingdom and salvation. They are to Matthew, Mark, and

¹⁸ Ibid., 438.

¹⁹ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 226.

Luke what John 2:23–3:21 are to the fourth gospel. When the three synoptic passages are compared, seven synonymous terms appear: (1) the kingdom of heaven, (2) the kingdom of God, (3) eternal life, (4) life, (5) salvation, (6) the regeneration, and (7) the age to come. Each of these terms, in these gospels, is speaking of the same reality.

The Verses: The following discussion will be based on Matthew's account. The man is introduced in the narrative as "someone" (19:16). As the event unfolds, the writer adds that he was a "young man" (19:20) and "he was one who owned much property" (19:22). In Luke, he is introduced as a "ruler" (18:18); thus the traditional ascription of this individual as "the rich, young ruler." He was probably somewhere around thirty-five years old; he had attained high status in Israel, possibly as a member of the Sanhedrin; and he had much wealth. He was also a man who was committed to keeping the Mosaic Law (19:20). To sum up, he was young, wealthy, influential, and legally righteous; if anyone could enter the kingdom based on human works, it was this man.²⁰

With all of his advantages, the man did not have the assurance that would obtain eternal life by entering the kingdom (19:16). However, he did believe that life could be gained by a "good thing" that he could do. Jesus pointed him to the second half of the Decalogue and Leviticus 19:18 (19:17b–19). The man affirmed that he had kept these commandments, but wanted to know what he still lacked (19:20). Although he might have kept the commandments outwardly, Jesus showed that his heart was full of coveting. If he truly wished to be complete, i.e. to attain his goal of obtaining life, Jesus commanded him to "go, sell your possessions and give to the poor" (19:21), "and come, follow Me" (Luke 18:22). This call of Jesus implied that the man repent of his sin of covetousness for forgiveness, the "fruit of repentance" in his particular case being to sell all and give it to the poor, and become a disciple of Jesus. In his case as well, there needed to be the confession of sin and the embracing of Jesus as his Savior and Messiah if he was going to enter the kingdom.

Jesus used the example of the rich man to teach his disciples of how hard it was and how humanly impossible it was²¹ for the wealthy to enter the kingdom (19:24–25). The disciples concluded from these words that no one can be saved (19:25). But Jesus replied that God is able to do the humanly impossible and save some (19:26). It is clear from these words that the disciples assumed that salvation was a necessity to enter the kingdom and the words of Jesus do not correct that assumption.

²⁰ Later, Saul of Tarsus would be described as a "young man" (Acts 7:58), and he would describe himself as "advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Gal 1:14), and "as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil 3:6b). The apostle Paul was previous to his conversion a rich, young ruler. Truly, "with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26)!

²¹ Turner (*Matthew*, 472) notes, "Despite sermonic lore based on medieval tradition and modern anecdotes, there is no early historical evidence for the existence of a small gate in Jerusalem, supposedly called the Needle's Eye, through which a camel on its knees could barely squeeze. This mistaken understanding weakens Jesus's hyperbole and implies that it is not actually impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom."

When Peter stated that the disciples had done what Jesus commanded of the man—“left everything and followed You” and wanted to know of their reward (19:27), Jesus pointed them to a future period of time called the restoration (19:28–29; called the age to come in Mark 10:30 and Luke 18:30) as the time of the reward. While Mark (10:30) and Luke (18:30) include reward in the present age as well, Matthew speaks only of the future reward. The threefold future reward for the disciples of Jesus was sitting on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, receiving many times as much as what they had left, and inheriting eternal life (19:28–29). These are kingdom of God realities that will be experienced by the Twelve in the age to come, the restoration.

Matthew 23:13

The Context: As recorded in Matt 21:1–11, Jesus finally arrived in Jerusalem, entering the city in the manner prophesied in Zech 9:9. He presented Himself in this “acted parable” to the nation of Israel as their promised Messiah. However, the crowds only affirmed Him as a prophet, not as Messiah (21:11). The religious leaders, on the other hand, were indignant when Jesus cleansed the temple and children in the temple shouted out the messianic claim concerning Jesus, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (21:12–17). What followed was an intense debate between the chief priests and elders concerning the exercise of God’s authority over the temple and the nation of Israel (21:23–22:46). To the consternation of the religious leaders, Jesus bested them in the confrontation. They wanted to seize Him then, but did not do so because the people held Jesus to be a prophet (21:46). The scribes and Pharisees (22:15), in particular, were dogmatically opposed to Jesus. In Matt 23:1–36, Jesus pronounced His “woes,” expressions of sorrow and warnings of judgments that would come upon these Jewish leaders. The result would be the national judgment of Israel (23:37–39; cf. the woes of Isa 5:8–23 that resulted in Jerusalem’s previous destruction [586 BC] and Judah’s exile).

The Verse: The first woe that Jesus uttered is recorded in 23:13, “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.” Wilkins succinctly summarizes the thrust of Jesus’ words:

Similar to Jesus’ key statement in the SM [Sermon on the Mount] (5:20), the scribes’ and Pharisees’ emphasis on external righteousness not only blinded them to Jesus’ gracious offer of inward righteousness through transformation of the heart, but their leadership role in Israel had caused the people to be blind as well. Therefore, Jesus condemns these leaders for hypocrisy.

. . . . Here he condemns them for the type of hypocrisy in which they deceive the people through their fallacious leadership. They have mounted the seat of Moses, from which they offer their teachings and traditions, but their pronouncements are false. They do not lead the people to God but away from the kingdom of heaven. Not only have they rejected the offer to enter the kingdom themselves, but their teachings and opposition to Jesus’ ministry

influence the people to reject that invitation as well. This is a terrible abuse of their responsibility.

Jesus condemns them for their hypocrisy, that is, attempting to bring the people into a righteous relationship with God while at the same time not being in a genuine relationship themselves.²²

John 3:5

The Context: The only uses of the expression “kingdom of God” in the gospel of John appear in 3:3, 5 (Jesus spoke of “My kingdom” three times in 18:36). The immediate literary context of 3:5 is 2:23–3:21, the account of Jesus’ interchange with a Pharasaic member of the Jewish Sanhedrin named Nicodemus. According to Jesus, Nicodemus was the preeminent teacher of the OT of all of Israel, yet he did not understand a basic OT teaching (3:10). Nicodemus was willing to acknowledge Jesus as a God-sent teacher based on the miracles which He had done in Jerusalem (cf. 3:2 with 2:23). However, Jesus confronted this man with the need of spiritual regeneration if he or anyone else was to “see the kingdom of God” (3:3). Jesus stated the one must be born from above to ever experience the realities of the kingdom.²³ This was a concept that Nicodemus was unable to comprehend (3:4), therefore Jesus further explained the meaning of His words (3:3) in 3:5.

The Verse: “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God’ (3:5). Here Jesus expounded what it meant to be “born from above.” Regeneration produced by one action involving water and the Holy Spirit was necessary for entrance into the kingdom.²⁴ Jesus repudiated the notion that anyone who has only experienced physical birth during this age will enter the kingdom when it is established on the earth in the future. He also implied (3:10) that this truth was already revealed in the OT. The specific OT passage to which Jesus was referring was Ezek 36:25–27, which echoed Jer 31:33–34 and Ezek 11:19–20.²⁵ Jeremiah predicted that under the New Covenant the Lord will make with Israel, “I [the Lord] will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (31:34b). The Lord also declared, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it” (31:33b). These two phases of God’s one action correspond to Ezekiel’s words from the Lord to

²² Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2004), 751.

²³ D. A. Carson (*The Gospel according to John*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991], 189) explains, “This regeneration is *anōthen*, a word that can mean ‘from above’ or ‘again.’ Because Nicodemus understood it to mean ‘again’ (cf. ‘a second time’, v.4), and Jesus did not correct him, some have argued the ‘again’ must stand. But Jesus also insists that this new birth, this new beginning, this new regeneration, must be the work of the Spirit, who comes from the realm of the ‘above’. Certainly the other occurrences of *anōthen* in John mean ‘from above’ (3:31; 19:11, 23).”

²⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger (*John*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004], 124) notes, “The phrase [“born of water and the Spirit”] probably denotes one spiritual birth. This is suggested by the fact that ‘born of water and spirit’ in 3:5 further develops ‘born again/from above’ in 3:3, by the use of one preposition (*ex*) to govern both phrases in 3:5, and by antecedent OT (prophetic) theology.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

Israel, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols” (36:25) and “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (36:27). This latter phase is also described as the removal of the heart of stone and the giving of a new heart, a heart of flesh (36:26; cf. Ezek 11:19–20).²⁶ Spiritual regeneration through receiving and believing in the Word, not mere physical birth, was necessary for any man, including the prominent Israelite Nicodemus, to become a child a God and ultimately enter the kingdom of God (3:5; cf. 1:12–13).

Conclusion

The words of Jesus recorded in the canonical Gospels are consistent. One needed to experience salvation if one was to enter the kingdom of God. The disciple must repent of his sin and embrace Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and Savior to experience the coming kingdom. Without spiritual regeneration, one will not see, nor enter the kingdom of God. This new spiritual life will produce a “righteousness” without which one is not fit to live in the kingdom.²⁷

The Inheritance of the Kingdom in the NT Epistles

While the NT epistles speak much less about the kingdom than did the Gospels, a number do address those who will or will not inherit the kingdom. The term “inheritance” denotes the eschatological portion assigned to a man. While believers are qualified now as those who will inherit the kingdom, the blessings of the inheritance will come in the future.²⁸ The following chart gives the characteristics of those who will or will not inherit the kingdom.

²⁶ For discussions of the future salvation of national Israel based on Rom 11:25–28, see Michael G. Vanlaningham, “Romans 11:25–27 and the Future of Israel in Paul’s Thought,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 3, No. 2 (Fall, 1992), 141–74, and Matt Waymeyer, “The Dual Status of Israel in Romans 11:28,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 16, No. 1 (Spring, 2005), 57–71.

²⁷ Robert L. Saucy (*The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1993], 101) summarizes the gospel teaching in this way, “The statements concerning a present entrance into the kingdom also do not portray a present kingdom on earth. Rather, as Robert Recker explains, these statements teach a relationship to God through Christ. ‘The passages in question point not to a realm but to a relationship, and this is substantiated by many passages in their context which call for a receiving of Christ (Mt. 7:21–22; 8:22; 10:25; 10:32–33; 38–40; 11:6), a submission to God or a stance of humility in relation to God (Mt. 5:3; 18:3–4; 20:25–28; 23:10–12), or simply subjection to God.’ This concept, that entering the kingdom is equivalent at present to beginning a relationship with Christ, is similar to that held by the early church, which saw its citizenship in heaven in relation to the King, whose return they awaited for the establishment of the kingdom on earth (Php 3:20).”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108–09.

Chart 3 – Those Who Will/Will not Inherit the Kingdom

<i>Those Who Will Inherit the Kingdom</i>	<i>Those Who Will not Inherit the Kingdom</i>
The washed, the sanctified, the justified (1 Cor 6:11)	The unrighteous (1 Cor 6:9–10)
The imperishable, the immortal (1 Cor 15:52)	Flesh and blood (1 Cor 15:50)
	Those who practice the deeds of the flesh (Gal 5:19–21)
	No immoral, impure, covetous man who is an idolater (Eph 5:5)
Those the Father rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of His dear Son (Col 1:12–13)	
The rich in faith (Jas 2:5)	

As in the Gospels, it is the one who has experienced genuine salvation who will enter the kingdom. As Saucy concludes, “The teaching of the early church, therefore, yields the same picture of the kingdom as that found in the Gospels. The establishment of the kingdom on earth is still future. The believer is related to the kingdom through faith in the King and is therefore an heir and already a citizen of the coming kingdom.”²⁹

The One Who Overcomes in the Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation records the future blessings in the kingdom and eternal state of “he who overcomes” in the present age. According to 1 John 4:1–6, the one who overcomes the deceptive spirits in the world who deny Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is the genuine believer. He is ‘beloved,’ ‘from God,’ and ‘God’s little child.’ Thus, the ‘overcomer’ in Revelation is best understood as a true

²⁹ Ibid., 110.

Christian.³⁰ The chart below lists the future blessings of “he who overcomes” in Revelation.

Chart 4 – The Future Blessings of “He Who Overcomes” in Revelation

“I [Jesus] will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.” (2:7b)
“He . . . will not be hurt by the second death.” (2:11b)
“I [Jesus] will give to him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.” (2:17b)
“I [Jesus] will give [him] authority over the nations; and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.” (2:26b–28)
“[He] will thus be clothed in white garments; and I [Jesus] will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” (3:5)
“I [Jesus] will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, which comes out of heaven from My God, and My new name.” (3:12)
“I [Jesus] will grant to him to sit down with me on My throne, as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” (3:21)
“[He] will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.” (21:7)

As in the Gospels and NT Epistles, the book of Revelation links the experience of the coming kingdom to those who are saved in the present age.

Conclusion

Thus, an inseparable link is seen between the kingdom and salvation in the NT. The Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation all show in differing ways that it is the saved of this age who will experience the kingdom when it is established on the earth with the return of Christ. God has, is, and will glorify Himself through the salvation of sinners. Those He has, is, and will save (regenerate) from fallen humanity will see and enter the kingdom of God when it is established upon the earth under the Messiah’s reign. They will also inhabit the new earth when the mediatorial kingdom is merged with the universal rule of God in the eternal state.

³⁰ For a complete discussion and strong defense of the interpretive conclusion that the one who overcomes is a genuine believer, see James E. Rosscup, “The Overcomer of the Apocalypse,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3, no.2 (Fall, 1982), 261–86.