



## Attaining the Kingdom of Heaven

How do we attain the Kingdom of Heaven? Where is it to be found? It is very easy for us in the Western world to view this Kingdom as something that one attains as a final destination or ending of a journey. As Orthodox Christians, we believe that the Kingdom of Heaven is Christ Himself, not a physical place or location.

It is within Christ that the Kingdom is to be experienced. For this reason, we cannot think of the Kingdom as something we are either “in” or “out” of. Through baptism and a life of repentance, we participate in the Life of Christ, and thus we participate in the Kingdom. The Kingdom is a dynamic state, wherein we grow in perfection through God’s grace. Our journey is not to the Kingdom, our journey is in the Kingdom.

As long as we are struggling to be Christlike, we are assuredly tasting of the Fountain of Immortality. When the struggle ends and the growth ceases, the Kingdom disappears. It is nowhere to be found. The moment we think we have achieved something, that we have earned our place, then we have lost the Kingdom. Our struggles are meaningless without Christ, and vice versa: without struggles, we are meaningless, because we will lose Christ.

Our Lord is only with those who need Him. When we lose our daily need for Him, then our souls become satisfied with the world. A man who does not hunger does not eat, and so one who does not hunger for God cannot partake of His goodness. This is why the Church has always urged us to participate in spiritual exercises like fasting and almsgiving, that we might stir up within ourselves the hunger for God. This hunger, this desire for God, will draw us closer to Him.

This is why Christ urges us to take up our crosses and follow Him. We ought not to seek after a life of ease, but rather boldly face our burdens with the confidence that in our suffering, we will be visited and comforted by Christ Himself.

Just as Christ disdained earthly glory for the shame and suffering of the Cross so that we might live, so we ought to remind ourselves that the applause of the world is the rattling of dead men’s bones. “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, / For so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). When we endure our Cross out of love for God and His children, when we patiently endure our trials, we grow in experiential knowledge of God Himself. The world tries to kill us, but we realize its weakness in the face of God.

The Kingdom of God is not a fluffy pillow or a down mattress. It is found by the nun sleeping on a board, or the elderly woman suffering in her hospital bed. The Kingdom of Heaven is a spiritual condition that no earthly situation can overcome. The nun sings songs, and the afflicted woman offers pure prayers. They both go through hardships that draw them closer to Christ.

You may ask yourself, “How can I suffer as they do?” You need not live in a monastery or a hospital to experience this growth; you can participate in the same perfecting journey by unconditionally loving and serving those around you. Do you hear bad things about someone? Then pray for them! Do you have a disagreement with someone? Then humble yourself and apologize! Loving your enemies and being modest are difficult tasks, yet they are perfecting works.



When God sees our struggles to put aside our ego, He will grant us strength. When He sees us acting on our desire to enter into the Kingdom of His love, then He will help us in our time of need. No one shall ever perish from seeking after God.

What will die as we participate in the Kingdom is our sinfulness. Our wretched arrogance and pride will suffer a horrible death in the presence of God's mercy and compassion. We will realize how unworthy we are to be in the Kingdom. And, as we see ourselves as sinners and unfaithful, our Lord shares with us His worthiness and faithfulness.

To not discredit the worthiness that Christ has shared with us, we must behave in a worthy manner. We must, as the Liturgy teaches us, "lay aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all." If we are bound by earthly cares, we cannot escape sin and temptation. Slander, gossip, anger, infidelity, theft, and all other sins stem from a heart filled with the world, not with Christ. A child of the Kingdom, who walks daily with Christ in prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, has no time for sins. Once you truly taste the Kingdom of Heaven, then worldly cares have no appeal.

The Apostles themselves struggled with this. As they walked with Christ, He taught them of the coming Kingdom. He gradually led them to understand that the Cross and the Resurrection were His way of sharing with them His divinity and renewed humanity. Yet they still struggled. The Gospel of Mark says:

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared." (Mark 10:35–40)

As we hear in the Scripture, to be exalted and glorified is not ours to seek out. Indeed, we will share in the trials of this life as Christ did, but we ought not to ask for glory and earthly honors. The Apostles assumed that our Lord had come to establish an earthly kingdom. They pictured a great castle and a fancy court. They fantasized about riches and grandeur, but they missed the point. The point is that the glory is not so important as the partaking.

"Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). If we can squeeze through the narrow gate, we ought to be satisfied. Those who seek the chief seats will be disappointed, which is why our Lord tells us to take the lowest. Do not think for a moment that seeking honors in the Church is somehow more spiritual than seeking honors in business or the social realm.

If we seek honor, then we are nursing our pride. This child will grow up to be our captor, for pride tells us we are perfect and have no need for God.

Pride tells us how inferior others are, and how they do not deserve our love or mercy. Pride will keep us outside the gates of repentance, telling us that we have no sins to confess and that we have the right to judge others.



Let us lay aside pride and arrogance, so that we can be saved by Christ and partake of His Kingdom. Let us grow in our love for Him, each day living out our baptism by drinking from the cup of cosuffering love for others. Let us take up our crosses and follow Christ in this world, being in the world, but not of it.

Beloved in Christ, we have been given so very much. It is now up to us whether we will grow more like Christ, or lose the Kingdom by conforming ourselves to worldly expectations. To grow in Christ, to grow in the Kingdom, means to be more loving, more forgiving, more generous, more supportive of others, more positive, more encouraging, more prayerful.

If we desire the Kingdom, then we desire the will of the King. Our Lord's desire is that His Kingdom be full, and so it is up to us to bring others in and keep those we have. Let us be good hosts and hostesses in the Kingdom. Let us serve the tables of the Lord, that the wedding banquet may be full of joy. There is a whole nation outside waiting to see the Kingdom. Let us all show them what it is like to grow in Christ.

*On Thursday, July 3, 2014, His Eminence [Archbishop Joseph](#) was elected Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of All North America by the Holy Synod of Antioch and His Beatitude Patriarch John X while meeting in Balamand, Lebanon.*