

Choosing the Kingdom of God

Total Time: 55-85 min

INTRODUCTION | 10 min

If there are new people, be sure everyone gets introduced. Even if everyone was here last time, make sure everyone knows each other's names.

Our last session ended with this challenge: In Matthew 6:10, Jesus said that we are to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is heaven." Our challenge was to spend five minutes going to our favorite news site or social media feed and praying that God's will would be done for two situations that concern us, and to repeat that process every day for a week.

Opening Question: Would any of you like to share if you did this and how it impacted you? *(Be ready to share your own experience in this if the participants don't have much to share.)*

The first time that we began our four-part discussion of the intersection of faith and politics, we looked at the reality that God made all people in His image and examined the implications of that truth.

Last time, we looked at what happens when humanity chooses to follow our own way and leave God behind. This week, we'll look at what happened when Christ faced that same temptation.

Pray to Begin: Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer¹.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

¹ English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. www.englishtexts.org

STORY | 10 min

Same Faith, Different Starting Points

In this story, Jonathan Walton, an author and Senior Resource Specialist with InterVarsity, reflects on the death of his mother, the economic realities of his upbringing, and what he pursued as a result. Let's read this story together.

Please have someone read this story by Jonathan aloud.

Ma's gravestone said, "August 24, 1952 – September 13, 2015." Seeing the date written out like that made it so final. She was gone. I realize now that I judged her and her choices. I said in front of crowds and in private conversations that the life she provided for us was "poor," and I subconsciously hoped that she would come to see the city and university she sent me to the way I did, as more valuable than ... the place she sent me from. I did not realize that this attitude was going to be one of the outcomes of my education, and I am disappointed that I could draw such a conclusion about the woman who raised me and the place she raised me in. I wanted Ma to see jazz and ballet at Lincoln Center, hear poetry at the Nuyorican Cafe, and smell the autumn air in a stroll down the Museum Mile to the Met while tasting different flavors of gelato. I wanted her to experience what is supposed to be the richest congressional district in the country, taking a break from one of the poorest places in America. She responded that she liked her simple life.

Three years later, as I sat in Grand Central Station writing these words on my laptop, I thought about how Ma knew something about being rich that economists and my humanities professors missed. I remembered the words that echoed in my mind as she slipped from life to death and life again with God: "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36 NKJV). I thought that advocacy would mean ensuring that the person I loved more than anyone in the world experienced the best of what this world had to offer. What I learned was that in Christ she had all that she needed, and I was forced to reflect on why I wanted these other things in the first place.

RESPONSE

Let's take a moment to reflect on how we are responding emotionally to this story.

1. What emotions came up for you as you heard this story?

Potential Examples:

- *"I felt sad because I know what it's like to lose a parent or loved one."*
- *"I felt understood because that's my experience as the first one in my family to go to college."*
- *"I felt surprised because I had never considered this before."*

2. When you think of "the best the world has to offer," what comes to your mind? Write your response in the first block of the handout.

SCRIPTURE STUDY | 30 mins

Jesus Chose His Father's Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

This week, we are looking at a passage from the New Testament. It centers around when Jesus first began His public ministry. The context is important; just before this passage, Jesus was baptized and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, with a voice from heaven saying, "You are my son, the Beloved, in you I am well pleased."

After His baptism, Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the desert. His time in the wilderness is reminiscent of the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the desert after being freed from enslavement in Egypt. Both were times of temptation and formation. In this passage, we will examine what tempted Jesus and why, to better contrast the kingdoms of this world with the Kingdom of God.

Invite someone to read the passage aloud.

PASSAGE: LUKE 4:1-13 (NRSVue)

¹ Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written^a, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" ⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said

^a verse 4: see Deut. 8:3

to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written^b, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'⁹ Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written^c, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹ and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said^d, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the characters and what is happening?
2. What repetitions, patterns, or themes do you see?
3. What else stands out or resonates?
4. What tensions or challenges between characters do you see in the text?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. What are the three temptations, and what makes them unique to Jesus?
2. How does Jesus resist these temptations?
3. Were you surprised that Jesus didn't contradict the devil's claim to have been given authority and glory (v. 6)? What do you make of that? What insight might this provide about the state of the world today?
4. Jesus received a blessing from the Father at His baptism, "You are my son, the Beloved, in you I am well pleased." The devil tempted Jesus around similar questions of identity, confidence, and authority. How might that blessing from His Father have strengthened Jesus as He faced these temptations?
5. What do you think temptations say about Jesus' relationship to power, and about how the Kingdom of God is different from the kingdoms of this world?

^b verse 8: see Deut. 6:13

^c verse 11: see Psalm 91:11-12

^d verse 12: see Deut. 6:16

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Which of these three temptations resonates with you the most, and why?
2. Consider where you feel most tempted. What scriptures, prayers, or songs help you now, or could help you in the future to overcome temptations and resist worshipping idols, seeking power or glory for yourself, or testing God?
3. How can those around you encourage and support your pursuit of the Kingdom of God, instead of political power or another idol?

CONCLUSION

As humans, we are easily tempted by money, power (including political power), and status. In the opening story, Jonathan was ashamed when he reflected on the fact that after he moved to NYC and to attend Columbia University, he began to view his mom's simple lifestyle back home as inferior. In contrast, his mom was not impressed by all of the city's displays of wealth and power because she knew that her life with Jesus was more than enough.

Jesus, too, was tempted by the devil. He resisted by quoting Scripture and refusing to take shortcuts to get what he needed (bread), rightfully deserved (worship), and what He had access to (protection). Instead, he obeyed His Father, even though that meant suffering.

We can resist temptation through being immersed in Scripture and surrounding ourselves with voices that encourage us to pursue the Kingdom of God. Even though pursuing God's Kingdom involves sacrifice for the sake of others, it is, as Jonathan's Ma knew, the only path to true joy.

CHALLENGE

- Take an inventory of what you stream on YouTube or Netflix, what you see in your feeds on TikTok or Instagram, and topics you discuss with your friends and family. Do they inspire you to build yourself and others up toward the ways of the Kingdom of God, or do they urge you toward selfishness, comfort and/or the suspicion of others?
- Invite Jesus to show you specific actions that He is calling you to take to surround yourself with voices that point to the way of Jesus, and then follow His lead in that.
- Pay attention to how changes in your awareness of the content you watch and conversations you have impact your tendencies to choose (or not choose) the way of the Kingdom of God this week.

CLOSING | 5 min

If you have time, please continue to the Beyond the Text section!

Make sure to thank participants for coming and invite them back, sharing the date, time and location for the next meeting.

Ex. "Thank you for coming today!"

If you look at the bottom of your handout, you'll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today's study. And if you'd like to dig deeper, the electronic version also includes four quotes about temptations we face in the United States.

Please save this handout along with the ones you will get in each succeeding session. We'll refer back to them as a way of reviewing what we've learned."

Closing Prayer: Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

*Scan the QR code for more resources
on God's Good News About Politics*



BEYOND THE TEXT (OPTIONAL) | 20-30 min

Leaving Temptation for the Kingdom of God

Please read the following excerpt silently.

After Jesus was tempted in the desert, his first words in the synagogue were “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me...,” reading from Isaiah 61. In Luke 4:14-20 Jesus announces that He is going to “preach the good news to the poor, proclaim liberty for the captives, make the blind see, and release the oppressed.” Because Jesus was faithful to His mission, God brought His vision to fruition. That vision includes total flourishing for all of creation, with the marginalized, under-resourced, and disenfranchised as the priority. The most pervasive temptations in our society are greed, pride, and a lust for power. We try to build our own versions of sovereignty in pursuit of independence, autonomy, and control. This is in opposition to the Good News of Jesus. With that in mind, consider these four quotes:

“God’s gift of a call to be Christ’s ambassadors of reconciliation intends to unseat other lords—power, nationalism, race or ethnic loyalty as an end in itself—and give birth to deeper allegiances, stories, spaces and communities that are a “demonstration plot” of the reality of God’s new creation in Christ. Put simply, reconciliation both names the church as and requires the church to be the sign and agent of God’s reconciliation.”

— Emmanuel Katongole, [Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing](#)

“When people of privilege pursue affluence, autonomy, safety, and power above everything else, not only do they miss out on the liberating and restorative work of Jesus, but they participate in greater inequality, segregation, and suffering for the most marginalized people in their community. When people of means pursue what is best for them and their own in an unequal society, their actions inevitably harm the common good. People like myself end up disobeying the central commandment of Jesus - to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves - all in the name of pursuing a dream life for ourselves.”

— D.L. Mayfield, [The Myth of the American Dream: Reflections on Affluence, Autonomy, Safety, and Power](#)

“Money cannot save you from tragedy, or give you control in a chaotic world. Only God can do that. What breaks the power of money over us is not just

redoubled effort to follow the example of Christ. Rather, it is deepening your understanding of the salvation of Christ, what you have in him, and then living out the changes that that understanding makes in your heart—the seat of your mind, will, and emotions. Faith in the gospel restructures our motivations, our self-understanding and identity, our view of the world. Behavioral compliance to rules without a complete change of heart will be superficial and fleeting.”

— Timothy Keller, [Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters](#)

Christian nationalism is impoverished as it seeks a kingdom without a cross. It pursues a victory without mercy. It acclaims God’s love of power rather than the power of God’s love. We must remember that Jesus refused those who wanted to make Him king by force just as much as He refused to become king by calling upon ‘twelve legions of angels’. Jesus needs no army, arms, or armored cavalry to bring about the kingdom of God. As such, we should resist Christian nationalism as giving a Christian facade to nakedly political, ethnocentric ventures.

— N.T. Wright, Michael F. Bird, authors of *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in the Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies*.

DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. What narratives did you hear from your family around money and status? For example, which universities, professions, or neighborhoods communicated value and prestige? And conversely, which ones were considered dangerous, uncomfortable, or beneath you?
2. If a group of people were to leave their love of money, power, and status behind and pursue the kingdom of God, what might that look like in your community? What needs might disappear and what problems may not exist? Brainstorm a list.
 - a. Share your list in pairs or as a group and take time to pray.
 - b. Ask God for freedom from unhealthy narratives related to money, power, or status.
 - c. Ask God to give your vision, community, and resources to bring those dreams to reality.