

Uncovering the Kingdom of Heaven in Your Workplace

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Matthew

Work is an essential component of God's kingdom. Matthew, the tax collector-turned-apostle, recounts Jesus' life and teachings to show us how God intends us to live and work in his new kingdom. As followers of Jesus Christ, we live in two worlds. We stand with one foot in the human world, where our work may be subject to unspoken expectations that may or may not be in accordance with God's ways. And at the same time, as Christians we are subjects of God's kingdom, committed to his values and expectations. In telling the story of Jesus, Matthew shows us how to navigate the human world until God's Kingdom is fully realized on earth.

At the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus announces that “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17). When we read “kingdom of heaven,” we may think of harps, clouds, and angel choirs, but Jesus is clear that the kingdom of heaven refers to God's rule on earth, in this world.

The opening chapters of Matthew's Gospel narrative present, in rapid-fire succession, stories demonstrating that Jesus is the Lord whose coming inaugurates the kingdom of heaven on earth. The Gospel of Matthew begins with a description of Jesus' ancestry and birth: the baby in a

Bethlehem manger is in the line of Israel's great king, David, and is a true Hebrew, going back to Abraham. With each story, Matthew's references to the Old Testament Scriptures show how Jesus' coming reflects a particular ancient text. We are to listen to Jesus because he is God's anointed, the promised Messiah, God entering the world in human flesh.

The story of the magi who seek out Jesus after his birth is especially relevant to work. Magi were astrologers who, going about their work of observing the stars, glimpsed the reality of God's power in the world. Their work guided them to recognize Jesus as the son of God. This points out how God's grace extends to all people and the entire cosmos, not only to believers.

Could it be that God is still drawing non-believers to himself through their work, including workers in science, nature, or the material world? This has applications when we talk about Christ in the workplace. Although we may think we are talking about Christ to people who don't know him, it may actually be that God is already making himself known to them through their work, as he did with the magi. We might be more effective if we recognize that what we are actually doing is helping co-workers name and appreciate the presence of God that their work is already revealing to them. And we ourselves might do well to recognize God's presence in our own work.

We live in what theologians call “the already, but not yet.” The kingdom of heaven has already been inaugurated by Jesus in his earthly ministry, but has not yet been fully realized—not until Christ returns in person as King. Meanwhile, our lives—including our work, our leisure, our worship, our joy, and our sorrows—are framed by the reality of living in a world partly controlled by the old, corrupt ways of the Fall, yet partly ruled by its true Lord, Christ. God calls his people to many different roles and occupations on earth. In all these jobs, we are to work towards the true reality: the reign of God that is coming from heaven to earth.