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THE BEST SEATS

You must admit that we are creatures of habit. How many of you take the same route to work every day? One time as I headed for church, as I approached a turn off I often took when going to work, I turned instead of going straight. Why did I do that? It was just an automatic thing that was done without thinking. It took me a few minutes to get back on the right path and I did manage to get to church on time.

We usually shop at the same grocery store or the same department store. We usually buy the same brand name products. We watch the same television programs and listen to the same radio programs. We even sit in the same seats in church. Ok, I know that I am close to meddling instead of teaching. However, it isn't a new thing to seek out special seating.

At first the ancient custom was to sit at a table to eat. Most ate, as some Oriental people do, sitting on cushions around a low table. Later on, the Hebrews adopted the custom, borrowed from the Persians, of lying on couches to have a meal. They lay on their left sides and ate with their right hands. John Gill, in his "Exposition of the Entire Bible", tells us that you could tell the status of the guest from the location where they sat. The set up for most feasts consisted of three low tables in the shape of a large U. Depending on which expositor you read, the best seats were either towards the upper end of the table, the middle of the table or at the lower end of the table where the master of the feast sat. One commentator states that the chief seat was the middle one at the upper end of the table.

In the synagogues there were seats at the front of the room clustered around the ark where the scrolls were kept. These seats faced the congregation. The chair closest to the ark was considered the best and coveted by the Scribes and the Pharisees. It was to these seats that the wealthy were invited to sit (James 2:2-3).

In early churches the pews were bought by the members of that particular church. The member held a pew deed and a recorded title to the pew. The money thus obtained went to the construction of the main church. These pews, privately owned, allowed the owners to build pew boxes around them. Given the diverse wealth of the members one can imagine the diversity in the construction.

Jesus taught that insisting on choosing a certain chair at any function could pose a problem. If you chose a chair that belonged to a more important person than you, you would be humiliated when asked to move. The problem was not that you choose to sit in the same seat every time. The problem was why you choose to sit in a particular seat.

In Matthew 23:1-7 Jesus begins a denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees. He tells the people to listen to them when they teach but not to emulate their life style. He tells them that their main objective in all that they did was to receive the praise of men. (Mt 23:5) They wore the elaborate robes, especially in public. The made sure that they were out in public at the time of prayer so that they could be seen praying, even out on the streets. They loved to be called Rabbi and receive all the benefits of their office. When they fasted they made sure that no one missed that fact that that were fasting.

Now what am I trying to say? Is it wrong to sit in the same seat Sunday after Sunday? This past June, we had about 389 kids and sponsors in our building at our annual Spiritual Explosion. No one got to sit in the seat they were used to. Did the world come to an end? Were there floods and earthquakes? No, the world spun around on its axis and we all had a great spiritual experience.

I will continue to sit in the same seat. I sit with one of our shepherds in front of me and one behind me so I must be a sheep that needs special care. I sit there because I like to sit up front. You choose to sit where you sit for whatever reason you choose. Just come in and sit. (Heb 10:25) You will be blessed by being here.

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THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Biographers necessarily take a particular position about their subject. Few people pay much attention to a biography that does not take a position. Especially after several biographies are written of a person, the writer must come up with a new angle, a controversial position, or a limited aspect of the person's life. If not, we would not need more than one biography of any individual. Perhaps the most biographed man in American history is President Lincoln. Over the past few years I have bought books about his selection of his cabinet, the development of the Emancipation Proclamation, and his assassination. I have seen others proposing he suffered from depression or Marfan Syndrome, an analysis of his decisions as Commander in Chief, and his collected writings. If these did not each have a difference of point of view or a new theory they would have little worth.

The same is true of the gospels. Why are there four accounts of the life of Jesus? Although some people say they are technically not biographies, each of the gospel writers approaches what Jesus did and taught in a different way. Mark is pretty straightforward, and his theme word seems to be "immediately." His audience appears to be primarily of the Roman mindset. Luke is

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very scientific, as befits a physician. He goes into more detail than the other writers, resulting in the longest of the gospels. John apparently wrote years after the other three, and his approach seems to be filling in details they left out. His theme appears to be the power and deity of Jesus, and his theme word is "only-begotten" (which the translators of the New International Version corrupted to the inaccurate "one and only"). Matthew includes more of the teachings of Jesus than the others. His is a distinctly Jewish approach, as evidenced by over thirty specific mentions of fulfillment of prophecy.

One of the phrases that Jesus used frequently seems to have fascinated Matthew. That is the idea of "the kingdom of heaven." That phrase appears in his writings about as many times as his references to prophecy fulfilled. In Matthew's mind Jesus had as his

primary ministry, as opposed to the purpose of his life, to teach about the kingdom of heaven. In fact, it is only in Matthew's gospel that the phrase appears.

The Kingdom of Heaven

Even before Jesus began preaching, John taught about the kingdom of heaven. "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt 3:1-2) As soon as John was imprisoned Jesus took up the same message. (Matt 4:17) He subsequently commissioned his disciples to teach the same thing while he was alive. (Matt 10:17) The consistent message before Jesus died, at least in Matthew's view of what was important, was that the kingdom of heaven was near.

That word "near" ("at hand") is important. It is the same word used when James says, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." (Jas 4:8) It was used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures) about the priests drawing near to God. (Ex 19:22, et al) The meaning is that something is in immediate proximity in place or, as in this case, in time. That poses a problem for many people's interpretation of this phrase. If the kingdom of heaven was about to appear when Jesus taught, then what is the kingdom of heaven?

Most people, when they hear the phrase, concentrate on the last word. Their view is that this is the kingdom which is or consists of heaven. Grammatically that is a possibility, just as Paul writes about the "helmet of salvation" or the "sword of the Spirit." (Eph 6) Indeed, if John and Jesus had not said that the kingdom was at hand, that might even be considered a probability. However, because of their timing it becomes less likely. One of the most common uses of the genitive form ("of X") is its use as a possessive. If this is its use here it would be the kingdom which belongs to heaven, a distinct possibility. Most likely, though, the "of" in this case indicates source: the kingdom which comes from heaven. But all of that still does not tell us what the kingdom is, if it is not heaven itself.

Paul says that those who were in the church were in the kingdom. "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." (Colossians 1:13) "That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory." (1 Thessalonians 2:12) John also said he was already in the kingdom.

I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the

word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Revelation 1:9)

According to Paul, the kingdom is present on this earth. Jesus will surrender the kingdom at the time that most people think they will enter it. The kingdom is not heaven, but will be under Christ until such time as we reach heaven.

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:24-26)

The kingdom of heaven has been around for almost two millennia. When Matthew quotes Jesus about the kingdom of heaven, most likely he was talking about the church on earth. It is the kingdom whose source is heaven, and which belongs to heaven.

Who is in the kingdom of heaven?

In the beatitudes (the first part of Matthew 5) Jesus calls certain types of people blessed, and then adds certain “rewards” for having those attributes. Twice among the nine blessings Jesus says “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This is said of the poor in spirit and those that are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Twice (Matt 18:3-4; 19:14) Jesus says that the kingdom is made up of people who humble themselves “as little children.”

Contrary, also, to some views of the church, membership in the kingdom apparently extends back in time, as well as forward. “Many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 8:11) It is amazing to think that when we sit in an assembly of the church, we are sitting with the patriarchs, and with all who have obeyed God.

Just as important as who is in the kingdom might be who is excluded. The Pharisees were righteous people (and not *just* in their own minds). Yet anyone who only has their righteousness cannot enter the kingdom. (Matt 5:20) Perhaps that is because they relied on their own righteousness for salvation, rather than the righteousness of Jesus. Likewise, many who acknowledge Jesus as Lord, but do not put that acknowledgement into practice are excluded. (Matt 7:21) Even “a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 19:23) Those who think they are in the kingdom of heaven may be seriously disappointed when Christ surrenders that kingdom to his Father.

The kingdom of heaven is like:

Over one-third of the verses that mention the kingdom of heaven use the formula, “the kingdom of heaven is like [or as]” something. In looking at these

similes maybe we can learn something about what the church is supposed to be.

Some of the parables about the kingdom emphasize its growth. From a small beginning of a few thousand one day, it has grown throughout the world. Jesus knew this would happen, when he compared the kingdom to a small mustard seed which grows into a large bush (Matt 13:31-32) or some leaven in a lump of dough (13:33). Others emphasize its importance. Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to a treasure in a field that a man sold all he had to buy (13:44) or a valuable pearl that a dealer converted his entire assets to purchase (13:45-46).

Most of the kingdom parables, however, emphasize a difficult aspect of the church. You see, the kingdom consists of people who are following God closely and those who some of its critics categorize as “hypocrites.” All are forgiven, but some are not as forgiving as God. (Matt 18:23-25) Some who are invited into the kingdom choose to reject it (Matt 22:2-14), while others choose to come in late (Matt 20:1-16). (Both of these parables end with the statement, “Many be called, but few chosen.”)

Some like to make a distinction between the five wise and foolish virgins (Matt 25:1-13) or the men with

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many talents and the man with one (Matt 25:14-30), by saying the wise ones were those in the kingdom and the foolish ones were not. Jesus did not make that distinction in the parables. All, he said, were in the kingdom. Some, however, would be shut out when he turns the kingdom back over to God.

To further emphasize this, Jesus told two other parables. In one many fish were caught in a net, and the division between good and bad did not come until the nets were ashore. (Matt 13:47-50) In the other a man planted good seed and an enemy planted weeds. (Matt 13:24-30) The weeds were not separated from the wheat until the harvest. The church is made up of all kinds of people, with all degrees of faith. The thing to remember is it is not the fish or the wheat that made the division.

The kingdom of heaven is Matthew’s theme. He probably wrote it early in the history of the church, to encourage Christians by the knowledge that they were in the kingdom. We, likewise, may be encouraged as we read Matthew’s version of a biography of Jesus.

THE MAN ON THE CORNER

We see them on the street corners. In every major city you see them at the exits and entrances to the freeways. Or, more properly, we try not to see them. These are the panhandlers and the homeless. (I make that distinction, because some homeless do not beg, and some beggars are not homeless.) Two thoughts come to my mind.

Some people are hesitant to give to people who ask for a handout on the street. The question comes into their head, "What if this person will spend what I give him on drugs or alcohol?" If it is a gift, what does that matter? When we give presents to our children, do we put strings on the giving? "I will give you what you want for your birthday, but only if you promise to take out the trash every day and hand wash the dishes after each meal." No, a gift is a gift. What is the motivation of the gift? Do you give out of obligation? Do you give so that you can say to God or to others that you gave? Then, maybe, you can put limitations on the use of the gift, because it is solely for your own benefit. Or do you give because God's word has always demanded that we help the helpless? "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." (Jas 1:27) If there are conditions added it is no longer a gift.

If you still want to give to the panhandler on the street corner, but have to comfort your own mind that it won't be spent on something of which you would not approve, there is a modern answer. Give the gift of a meal. These days you can purchase gift cards in almost any denomination and for almost any location. If you regularly pass one corner where people are begging for money, go to a nearby restaurant and

buy a handful of gift cards. At some places if you buy a certain amount they will throw in an additional \$5 card for free. Then hand these out. If the person is not really looking for a meal, he may refuse the card. You have done your part; you tried to give. If the person is sincere in their need, they will gladly take the card, and bless you for it. (And if somebody takes the card, sells it to someone else, and uses the money on drugs, what is that to you? Have you never regifted an item?)

The second thought that comes to my mind relates to our common reaction when we see someone shabbily dressed, standing on a street corner, perhaps holding a hand-lettered sign. The typical response, even if they don't have a sign, is to look away. Don't even see if they are just waiting to cross the street. Don't make eye contact. A child may cover his head with a sheet and leave his hands and legs visible, then claim "you can't see me." That is our childish reaction to many homeless and beggars. If we turn away, then they must not be there. If I can't see him, then I have no obligation to try to relieve his pain or hunger.

Before you give in to that reaction, stop and think. We are called to follow a homeless man. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head." (Lk 9:58) If that homeless man you just turned your back to was Jesus, what might you think when you found out?

Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee? Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me. (Matt 25:44-45)

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