

## The Myth of the Two Kingdoms

Luke 12.15-34  
Kevin Finch

Next week we start the season of Advent that leads up to the celebration of Christmas. From the stand point of the church calendar, next week begins a whole new church year.

That of course means today is the last Sunday of the current church year, and today is the Sunday historically that we focus on **Christ as King**. Just this title summons up for me images of castles and knights, banners and armor, crowns and thrones, and of course kings.

And more than this, the idea of Christ as King stirs up in me a kind of Christian nationalism where Jesus stands as the champion of people of faith from every tribe and nation, undaunted in the face of the hosts of hell and darkness. Particularly in a world that seems increasingly dangerous and unpredictable, I love the idea of Christ the King.

I just don't like the reality of Christ as King in my life. Jesus as savior, great. Jesus as healer, wonderful. Jesus as shepherd, sweet. Jesus as friend, almost too good to be true. But Jesus as lord and king?

As anything more than an idea, Jesus as King threatens the precious territorial sovereignty of Kingdom Kevin. And as small and insignificant as Kingdom Kevin might be, I've grown fond of the notion that at least here I am in charge.

Oh, of course as a Christian I'm in favor of some loose federation where we followers of Christ band together to support worthy causes. But submission to Christ as absolute king? Why don't we just skip ahead to Advent, and stuff King Jesus back into the manger in a diaper. We can sing with gusto "Infant Holy, Infant Lowly" and pretend a little while longer that we are still in charge our lives—maybe as regents—until the Christ child is old enough to assume the throne.



Kingdom Kevin

That is what I'd like to do today... but the last few weeks as John has invited us to wrestle with stewardship in Acts 2 has got me thinking about Christ the king, and the link between kings and [Type a quote from the document or the summary of an interesting point. You can position the text box anywhere in the document. Use the Text Box Tools tab to change the formatting of the pull quote text box.]

treasure—our treasure. And almost immediately I remembered a little parable that Jesus told in Luke's gospel just before he got very specific about our fears, our treasure, and God's reign.

And the more I think about it, I believe this parable and what follows just may be God's Word for us today at the end of this church year. So I would ask you to listen in Luke 12.15-34 for just this... God's Word to you:

<sup>15</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." <sup>16</sup> Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup> And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' <sup>18</sup> Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup> And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' <sup>20</sup> But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared,

whose will they be?' <sup>21</sup> So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

<sup>22</sup> He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup> For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. <sup>24</sup> Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! <sup>25</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>26</sup> If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? <sup>27</sup> Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>28</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! <sup>29</sup> And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. <sup>30</sup> For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. <sup>31</sup> Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

<sup>32</sup> "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. <sup>33</sup> Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Did you catch the striking little soliloquy in the heart of the parable in the passage today? The rich man gets to talking to himself and planning what to do with his bumper crop. Here is the **Message** translation of that conversation:

He talked to himself: "What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for all this harvest." Then he said, "Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, 'Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!'"

I love that... "I'll say to myself, 'Self, you've done well!'"

In fact, this sounds something like my own internal monologue on any given day though I must confess my own monologue isn't usually so bright and chipper.

How many of you have seen the movie **The Princess Bride**? The hero of the story, a farm boy named Westley leaves to seek his fortune with the hopes of returning to marry his sweetheart named Buttercup. Only the ship on which he sets sail is captured by the Dread Pirate Roberts. Roberts dispatches of the rest of the crew, but Westley asks the pirate to spare his life. "Why?" Roberts asks.

"True love," Westley says. "True love." And Roberts relents... taking on the boy as something of a pirate apprentice on probation. How tenuous the situation was for Westley is illustrated by a little bedtime liturgy of the Dread Pirate Roberts: "Good work today, Westley," Roberts would say each night, "I'll probably kill you in the morning."



Now I share this because my internal monologue in life is much more Westley-on-pirate-probation than it is rich-man-after-bumper-crop. It is more along the lines of: "Well that sermon seemed to go okay, but the next is sure to flop and probably will get me fired. Sleep well, Kevin, the bottom will fall out in the morning."

And because this is the voice in my head, I actually am a little envious of the rich man in our parable today: envious of his abundance and envious of his self-confidence... even though I can read between the lines as well as you can and know things are not likely to turn out well today for Mr. Big Barns.

Jesus starts out ominously enough with a warning: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." How's that for foreshadowing? Then there is Mr. Big Barns' own smug monologue... hardly the kind of commentary commended in the gospels... especially in Luke with his huge heart for those on the margins and in need. In fact, did you know that virtually everyone who talks to himself or herself in Luke ends up in serious trouble?

Yet even knowing this... if I'm honest... I'm jealous of Mr. Big Barns. I begrudge him his abundant crop and his bursting silos not for any noble reason, but simply because he has what I want.

Enough and more than enough: abundance.

But God says to him, "You fool!" You fool! Why? For wanting to be secure? For wanting enough? Like me? Like you?

No. Mr. Big Barns is a fool for one reason and one reason only: because in his security and abundance there is no place for the bedrock reality of God. In his world of self straight up there is no place for the only true security and only real source of enough. Throughout scripture a fool is defined not as someone stupid, but rather as simply someone whose actions and choices deny the reality of God. Psalm 14.1: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

And I don't know about you, but this definition of foolishness strikes way too close to the bone for me. Sure I might say God is real and the center of my life, but do my choices support my claims?

One thoughtful student of Luke's gospel by the name of Joel Green notes that in the passage just before our parable today Jesus calls for faithfulness in situations of life-threatening persecution. And Green goes on to suggest a parallel call in our parable today for faithfulness in situations of "life-threatening possessions."

"Take care!" Jesus tells the crowd and the disciples and us. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

And on this Christ the King Sunday, we are back where we started because greed is kingdom issue: one of sovereignty and one of control.

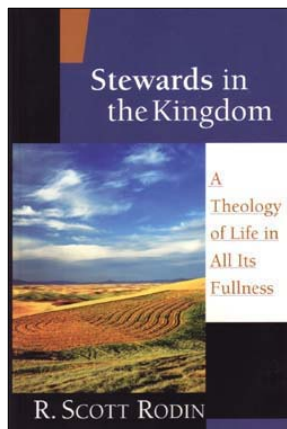
Our rich man, Mr. Big Barns, thinks he is in charge of his domain.

'What should **I** do," he says, "for **I** have no place to store **MY** crops?"<sup>18</sup> Then he said, '**I** will do this: **I** will pull down **MY** barns and build larger ones, and there **I** will store all **MY** grain and **MY** goods.

Emphasize the "I"s and the "My"s and you can barely read the passage. It is all about him: his crops, his barns, his goods. Just like, too often, it is all about me.

This hit me especially hard the first time I talked with Scott Rodin. Scott is a professional fundraiser who lives locally after years on the East Coast, and in 2000, Scott published a book called **Stewards in the Kingdom: A Theology of Life in All Its Fullness**.

And in my conversation with him (and in the book) he said that most of us as Christians live as if there are two kingdoms of concern... our kingdom and God's. And we are actually quite proud of our enlightened two-kingdom thinking. We shake our heads and snort at our self-centered acquaintances outside the church who live solely for themselves and ignore the reality of God's kingdom.



Sure we (like them) invest in our own kingdom infrastructure—shelter, transportation, clothing, food, and, in my particular case if you believe John, unnecessary kitchen appliances—but we also tithe to God's kingdom, don't we? If not a full 10% tithe, we at least give something. 1 or 2 or 3 percent of our gross or our net to further what God is up to in the world.

Today's parable is a warning, but not for us. We aren't the fools whose actions and choices deny the reality of God. Why after the stewardship pitch two weeks ago we are actually planning to up our pledge and generously transfer an even larger percentage of assets from our kingdom to God's.

And in the process we miss Jesus' warning, and today... because of our "life-threatening possessions"... pull up short of the real abundance and adventure and freedom of living, as Jesus puts it in the passage, 'rich toward God.'

Do not worry about your life, [Jesus says] what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Jesus then reminds us about God's all-you-can-eat buffet for the ravens and his glorious designer dresses for the lilies of the field. "Do not keep striving," Jesus pleads, "for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. Instead, strive for God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Two-kingdom thinking, Scott Rodin says, is a myth, and the more I read of scripture the more I agree. If we buy into this idea of two-kingdom thinking, we never move further into God's kingdom than the twilight zone at the very edge... living almost as self-focused and fearful and God-vacant a life as the rich fool in our parable today.

Not only do our lives not consist in the abundance of our possessions, know that any deed or title, any house or land, any stock or bond that we try to claim personally as a basis for our security or abundance will turn out to be life-threatening forgeries.

And as long as we fight to retain sovereignty over our lives and our possessions we are no better off than Mr. Big Barns for we remain cut off from the only real security and source of enough that exists.

Bold words... but what if they are true? What might it mean for Kingdom Kevin and your territories as well?

I think it means **unconditional surrender**. Christ the King is calling us today to surrender our puny sovereignty... our pretense of control of our lives and all we think we own... and **step into the freedom and expanse of the real world where God is king and we are stewards**... not just of our lives and stuff but so much more... stewards of God's abundance.

Let me say this again: We are called to surrender the sovereignty of our lives for a new role and a stunning identity. Instead of the sham of life as minor kings with serious border security issues, God calls

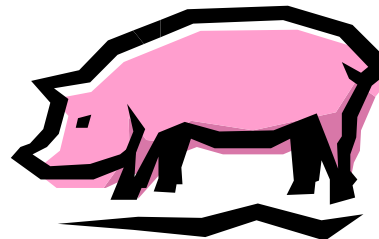
us to live as stewards of his incredible abundance, and what is in our bank account and what is in our garage become just a drop in the bucket of what we get to care for in freedom and joy.

Oh, and did I mention, we also get a new identity? Set down your 24-carat tinfoil crown and you find yourself the kid of the real king who Jesus says cannot wait to give you far more than you could ever ask for or imagine. In fact he says it today:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

That would be the REAL kingdom. Bob Hudson, in his book **Call to Prayer**, tells this story of his own life:

Hudson became a Christian in 1956 after his discharge from the Army, and that same year he also got married, bought part of the family farm, and began pursuing his dream of building Indiana's greatest hog operation ever.



But before long he felt an inner check and got the sense that God was asking him to surrender his vocation. Not pleased with this and in good Old Testament fashion, Hudson told God, "Alright God, if I'm headed the wrong direction, give me a sign. I have 80 sows. If none of them has babies, I'll believe you have other work for me."

He thought that would settle it only to have his vet inform him two weeks later that every boar he had was sterile. Needless to say, that got his attention and in the days that followed he kept paying attention... including seeing a job listing for an accountant position for World Gospel Mission. Hudson applied since he was trained as an accountant, got the job, and worked there for 25 years. He concluded that the whole hog operation had been just his own pipe dream until one day just before his retirement a missionary from Honduras approached him with a request: "Bob, when you retire, could you help us start a hog operation?"

His reaction... not the missionary, but to God: "You have to be kidding!" But God wasn't, and in 1999 Bob and his wife moved to Honduras, and now run the hog operation of his dreams as well as and a vocational training program for 25 men.

Christ the King calls us today to surrender the sovereignty our lives to become so much more. Christ the King calls us to step into the freedom and expanse and joy of God's one kingdom world with a new role and a new identity. You see, a job offer is on the table for us today to become stewards of God's abundance and the adoption papers... why they are already signed: we are children of the one true king.

So today, what do you say?

Is it going to be two or one?

It is going to be sovereign or steward?

Pretender with a security system for the golf clubs in the garage or a child of the king?

For Jesus is right: where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.