

Kingdom Living Today

Illustrating the WAY of God's Kingdom for a Modern World

20. The American Dream — Affluent Deception

"MANY OF YOU WHO THINK YOU BELONG TO ME ARE LIKE THE SEED THAT FELL AMONG THORNS. YOUR LIFE IS CHOKED BY LIFE'S WORRIES, RICHES AND PLEASURES SO YOU DO NOT MATURE AND PRODUCE FRUIT FOR MY KINGDOM."

A gentle breeze wafted in through the open windows as the fellowship family sat around emptied dishes in Jack and Dee's dining room.

"I'm sure going to miss these Wednesday night gatherings together!" Juan exclaimed as he looked with damp eyes at these people who had become family for him and his own little family. "Besides these great potluck meals, the Holy Spirit always seems to have something special for us all." As the others nodded with smiles, the young soldier continued, "I've got seven more days until I ship out for Afghanistan again, and you can bet I'll be thinking of you all and missing you."

"I know that each of us feels the same, Juan," Dee responded with grandmotherly warmth reflecting unabashed love for this "son" in the Spirit.

The young man beamed. "I really appreciate that! I've never experienced this kind of genuine care from others before."^(1 John 4:7) Looking around at the men, he added, "I'm looking forward to my last breakfast with you guys this Friday to make sure I'm ready to reach others for Jesus while I'm away."^(Proverbs 27:17)

"I'm glad you mentioned Friday," Jerome jumped in. "I have an announcement to make: Keisha will no longer be there to serve us coffee!"

Everyone's eyes darted from Keisha back to Jerome as the couple grinned with delight. "We want you all to share in our joy because we have a testimony to our Father's faithfulness!"^(Psalms 40:10) Keisha blurted gleefully.

Jerome took up the story. "As you all know, Keisha's been working because we've been financially strapped. A week or so ago we talked with Jack about this, and he asked us if we tithed. When we said 'No,' he showed us Malachi 3:10 where God says something like, "Bring in the whole tithe and test Me in this, and see if I'll throw open the floodgates of heaven to bless you!"

At this point Keisha laughed out loud with joy. "Jack encouraged us to pray about this, and if God convicted us that we need to be tithing, then start doing it." She took her husband's hand and went on, "Jack also urged us to ask Jesus where He wants His resources sent. So after we prayed, we did sense our Lord wanted us to send part of our tithe to Voice of the Martyrs for our persecuted family in Christ and the rest to a family we know who have some heavy personal needs."

Everyone praised God joyfully because of the obedient step of trust the couple had taken — the same step Jack had presented to all of them to pray about.

"Now here's the neat part we're praising God for," grinned Jerome. "Three days after we began to tithe, I was called into our manager's office and given a promotion with a lot more pay."^(Luke 6:38) Now Keisha doesn't have to work any more!"

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*Sharing the Hebraic Foundations of the Earliest Followers of Jesus
Preparing Today's Followers of Jesus to Fulfill Their Part in His Kingdom*

As delight erupted around the table, Keisha wrapped her arm around her daughter Maya and announced, “We’re going to look into home schooling this precious girl! We hope you’ll all give us guidance.”

Harry burst in, “Jack and Dee recently finished helping Jan and me develop the biblical basis for our home schooling Josh. We’ll be glad to share these principles with you.” Brett and Lacie responded the same. Then turning to Jack, Jerome asked, “You’re really committed to parents taking full responsibility for training their own children, aren’t you?”

Jack was still cherishing in his heart the good news he’d just heard. Then he said soberly, “Yes, I am. Too many families in this nation have been seduced by what’s often called ‘The American Dream.’” As the others focused their attention on him, he continued, “The difficulty for us as we wholeheartedly follow Jesus is that the American Dream opposes everything our Lord calls for if we’re to fulfill our part in His Kingdom.”

The gathered families digested this for a moment before Brett spoke up. “I think we’ve all in some way aspired toward a vague quest of the American Dream. Could you explain what you mean?”

Because she and Jack had helped each other deprogram from this pursuit, Dee took up the question. “The American Dream is basically an irrepressible pursuit of personal prosperity. You know, a better, richer, happier life for yourself and your kids.” Heads nodded in understanding as she went on, “The idea of the American Dream is rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that everyone has certain inalienable rights, including ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’”

Jack added, “Home ownership, for example, is a mark of the perceived right to prosperity. Ownership is a status symbol which separates the rich from the middle class, and the middle class from the poor.”

The older man knew from the confused looks that further explanation was needed. “The more you understand the goals of our Lord’s Kingdom, the more you see the demonic hindrance of the American Dream. It’s the force behind the wealth/power structure which perpetuates the racial and class inequalities in our nation.” He paused briefly then added, “That blatant disparity and the personal hunger for more of the prosperity pie destroys the cohesion of even Christian families and faith communities.”

“Do you remember that study on this you read awhile back?” Dee interjected.

“Yes, I do,” Jack responded, “mainly because it opened my eyes to things going on in this country that I’d never considered before.”

“Please, tell us!” Harry blurted, eager to know if anything his mentor was saying had infected his own life and family. Jack’s voice was serious. “That study described the hidden agendas behind the different classes in the US. For the middle class, *work and achievement* are the forces that drive them. The wealthy, on the other hand, are motivated by *political, social and financial prestige*. And, those raised in generations of poverty are driven by *survival, entertainment and relationships*.”

“Wow!” Brett burst out. “No wonder each group can misunderstand the others and experience tension with them — no one understands where the others are coming from! But how does the Kingdom fit into all of this, Jack?”

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“Well, keep in mind,” the older man replied, “that because of the Spirit of Jesus in us, the Kingdom of God is there too.^(Luke 17:21) If each of us is to do our part in the Kingdom, we need the humility and willingness to suffer the loss of everything we have in order to carry out our Lord’s will.”^(Mark 8:34,35) Dee broke in softly, “And Jesus tells us that the poor have an advantage in not being tempted by so much to cling to: *‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’*”^(Luke 6:20)

At this point Lacie glanced at her husband and said, “I can see how Brett and I in the Middle Class feel like our strong work ethic is the only way to go. But until recently,” she added with a grimace, “we’ve put most of our effort into the American Dream rather than into the Kingdom of God.”^(Colossians 3:23,24)

Harry added, “I’ve been realizing that the richer you are, the harder it is to even enter the Kingdom — it’s very tempting to trust in what you have and in what you can preserve for yourself.” He sighed deeply as he admitted to his fellowship family, “I’ve anguished over this, especially our Lord’s warning that *‘it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God.’*”^(Mark 10:25)

“Lita and I sure don’t have much money,” interjected Juan, “but we know that if we make it our main focus, that’s just as bad as striving to keep it!”

His young wife added, “I keep thinking about that dear widow who gave all that she had to live on, as little as it was, because she trusted her Lord so much.”^(Mark 12:41-44) That’s the kind of faith I want! I don’t ever want to be stingy and miss meeting the needs of others.”^(1 John 3:17)

As the others glanced at the young mother appreciatively Jan observed, “We also need to remember that our Lord didn’t say it was *impossible* for the rich to enter His Kingdom, because everything is possible with God.”^(Mark 10:27) Then she went on, “I can see that it isn’t just whether we’re poor, middle class, or rich, but how we view what our Lord has entrusted to us that’s key. I know that since Jack and Dee have helped us develop our *halakhah* on giving, our family doesn’t see the money Harry earns as ours any longer.”

“I’ll say,” their son Josh jumped in. “My parents see all their resources as belonging to God, and that they have no more right to it than anyone else!”^(Acts 2:44-46) He smiled at his parents and added, “I think Dad calls it ‘stewardship’ rather than ‘ownership’. We sure seek our Lord’s will a lot more now over what to do with our money — and I’m glad!”

Jack was delighted that Josh had offered that insight. Reaching over to pick up his Bible he asked the others to open theirs to Luke chapter 4, verses 18 and 19. Introducing the passage, he noted, “Jesus describes for us the objectives of His own ministry. If we’re to authentically follow Him, we need to follow in His steps in one or more of these ways He listed: *“to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

Jerome broke in quickly with a chuckle, “You can almost hear the various portions of that passage as a job description!”

“That’s a good observation,” responded Jack. “Let me make this pointed for each of us personally to consider. Since we’re in Christ through His Spirit, He’s anointed each of us and sent each of us as His ambassadors to do His work: to preach good news

to the poor; to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."(Matthew 25:31-46)

"I can see something here!" Keisha exclaimed. "Jesus has burdened Jerome to reach out to other black men so they can be free from their spiritual prison. And the Spirit has put into my sister Patrice's heart, along with the rest of our family, to do likewise."

Jerome joined in, "In that *Jesus in Your Home* video series you gave us, the presenters commented how the Spirit gave them a vision and commanded them 'to free the captives.'"(See *Going to the High Places*, Chapter 1, Part 1, p. 8)

"Who do you think the blind are?" Josh asked as he turned to Grandpa Jack.

"You could probably apply it to someone who's visually impaired," Jack smiled at the teen. "But I like to think that Jesus is talking about the same blindness the religious leaders of His day experienced. In Matthew chapter 23 Jesus repeatedly calls them 'blind guides,' 'blind fools,' and 'blind Pharisees.' Maybe this is a ministry for someone to confront the blind religious establishment today."(Jeremiah 1:17-19)

Lita then commented, "I know it's not just finances that our Lord is interested in as His servants. He's also looking at how we use our time and resources for His Kingdom." She smiled at Dee as she added, "The kids and I really enjoyed our time with you at the nursing home, and I've committed to joining you there each week."

Kelsey jumped in with eager 9-year-old enthusiasm. "I'd like to help Lita by caring for little Lili and Ada whenever I can! "

"And, I'd like to help Kelsey babysit for the kids," Maya proclaimed happily.

Jack smiled at his beloved wife, whose eyes were flowing with joy, then said to his gathered faith family, "I know we'll have many more conversations about the Kingdom of God and how each of us can do our part in it. I just want to encourage you about how important it is to continue to seek God's commands and apply them to your lives. Dee and I are always here to help."

"We've all experienced God's blessing because of your counsel," Brett replied, voicing what was in the hearts of all around the table.

"I appreciate hearing that," Jack returned. "Let's conclude our discussion by looking at something that ties in to what we've been saying. Let's turn to Matthew 16:19. Jesus tells us, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."* What do you think the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" are?"

Brett had spent time pondering this question himself and spoke up. "I think the keys are *halakhahs*, the way we put into practice the Bible's commands. The 1,050 commands in the Newer Testament really flesh out the 613 commands in the Older Testament — and God designed them all for our well-being because He loves us!"

"I agree," Jack nodded as the others signalled the same. "Since we've been given the keys to His kingdom, we need to begin in our homes to fulfill how He wants each of us to live. For centuries religious systems have kept the keys of the kingdom under their control, but that's sure not what our Father intends!"(Luke 11:52; 10:21)

A sense of determination about their Kingdom purpose filled each heart. Jack asked Josh to close them in prayer. The young man's voice was filled with holy boldness, and on behalf of the group he gratefully praised his Lord and asked, sought, and knocked according to his Father's will.(Proverbs 28:1; Luke 11:9,10)

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