

# **The Parable of Kingdom:**

## ***the Kingdom or a Kingdom***

**T. Dave Matsuo**

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**Contact:**

**[www.4X12.org](http://www.4X12.org)**

**[tdavematsuo@4X12.org](mailto:tdavematsuo@4X12.org)**



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# The Parable of Kingdom: *the* Kingdom or *a* Kingdom

## The Beginning

How, not just where, did you grow up? I grew up in a big city, in a typical inner-city neighborhood occupied by diverse people. What this became for me is a formative story of how I grew up, not where. And I hope and pray that what follows will encourage you to piece together your own story. That is, your story of *how* you grew up, because each of our lives is a vulnerably personal life story that makes up a broader narrative composing a parable of kingdom.

This narrative voices kingdom with a sound either reverberating as merely as *a* kingdom, or resounding as *the* kingdom—namely, the parable of God’s kingdom and *how* God wants us to live and experience life together as God’s people. The following parable will clearly distinguish that nothing less and no substitutes from God can voice *the* kingdom, while exposing anything less and any substitutes voicing *a* kingdom. Thus, what is heard next will be the parable amplifying the consonance or dissonance with *how* God wants us to live in everyday life.

Continuing my story, my family lived in a multi-unit apartment building that was one block away from my elementary school. I had a brother 5 years older than me and various other kids in our building, plus other kids living on our block. At different times and ways the kids on our block came together in a variety of activities, including just hanging out and talking.

When not in school I would spend most of my time making these different connections. I learned different games, how to ride a bike and various sports. Most interesting, a group of us from my brother’s age to mine would regularly sit outside the base of our apartment building and just talk, mess around and simply be together—for example, on most evenings when the weather allowed. Since I was usually the youngest, my mom would routinely call out to only me from our 3<sup>rd</sup> floor porch, “Time to come in!” and I would sadly say goodbye to the others who didn’t have to go home.

While my identity was formed in this neighborhood collective, what had the most lasting influence on my life was the sense of *community* that we experienced together. These frequent connections we had together formed bonds in our relationships, bonds that were lacking in my biological family. Thus, I usually didn't feel lonely, and later I missed our connections as persons went off to different high schools. This formed a gap for me, because I no longer had relationships bonding in community; and this condition became the subtle norm in much of my student and young adult life. Notably, this relationship gap evolved even though the internet and social media had yet to exist to preoccupy everyday life.

This was my beginning, which reveals a shared story of human life—my chapter among many other chapters of a recurring cycle formed “in the beginning.” As these stories are shared, they vulnerably bring to the forefront elements signifying the parable of kingdom that gives voice to the desire, need, recourse or futility in the search for *community*. Most important, as we hear these narratives, we can discover (1) what does not and what truly does constitute *the* kingdom created by God for human persons (individually and together), and (2) *how* this uncommon kingdom becomes the relational reality for us.

## Chapter 1

## In the Beginning

In the beginning chapter of the human story, a couple of persons made connection in their neighborhood. They engaged in creative activities that benefitted their neighborhood, but most of all they formed a relationship bond between them that was very satisfying to their basic need and desire. In the course of their life together with the sense of community, they became distracted from what was essential to their persons and relationship together. Consequently, their unique vitality got infected by self-interests and the desire to pursue their own gains, which came at the expense of their relationship together. Their individualism determined how they now lived, and this created distance in their relationship; and this relational distance subtly raised barriers to the deeper connection earlier enjoyed to their full satisfaction.

As expected, this change voicing how these persons now lived also widely affected the neighborhood, such that the loss of community became the evolving norm in the human context. Other persons who were initially influenced by the formation of community in the beginning later tried to build a sense of community in their neighborhoods based on their assumptions about humanity. Some assumed that human life could co-exist together by better extending the individualism of the initial two persons above. Others assumed that humanity is monolithic and thus that everyone should be the same in their identity and lifestyle. Each of these assumptions led to experiments in human life, which, in one way or another, continue to be attempted even to this day.

In other words, humanity has been on an evolving journey roaming through human life in search of community. The relational condition fulfilling persons in the bond of relationships together that constitutes community—just as the original persons experienced with satisfaction for their relational reality in the beginning—has become an elusive consider.

Therefore, humanity is populated by migrants searching for a place to *belong*, seeking their homeland, or the created roots for human life. This has been the historical story of God's people, which the parable keeps unfolding.

Their story has evolved through a fragmented history without arriving at the wholeness of their created identity and function. A relatively recent chapter of this story reverberates in human history.

Searching for a place to belong and call their home, a group of migrants journeyed to a “new” neighborhood. They established footholds in this neighborhood by pushing out the original occupants or by subordinating these persons rather than joining with them in relationships together as community. The migrants dominated the neighborhood as their domain and voiced a unidimensional identity and unilateral function to characterize their land as God’s kingdom. To be expected, the composed tune voiced by this emerging neighborhood faced differing or opposing compositions voiced by surrounding neighborhoods. In the process of suppressing variant compositions, those neighborhoods were subjected to the manifest destiny of God’s so-called kingdom, and even subject to its rule.

This “new” neighborhood may not have considered its approach to community to be typical for humanity, because it assumed to be on a religious basis ordained by God. In actual fact, the reality is that they were engaged in sociocultural issues amplified increasingly by a political means to serve their ethnocentric end. Underlying their policies were subtle as well as blatant economic, racial and even gender biases, all tuned to their ethnocentric frequency. One of the repercussions this has on the neighborhoods was pervasive discrimination such as NIMBY (not in my back yard). Thus, this neighborhood was not unique to humanity but reflected humanity’s human condition.

Typical of the human condition, this neighborhood of God’s people merely became associated with each other as a substitute for deeper relational connection. The consequences, therefore, for this contemporary *association* considered God’s neighborhood involved becoming composed by a gathering of disconnected persons essentially “alone together.” Their condition was not the exception but the norm for the neighborhood. Thus, unintentionally reflecting the human condition, they belonged in a structure of a collective without the vital significance of direct connection in the depth of heart-to-heart relationships together. Not surprising to those paying attention to the human condition, their prevailing condition separated them from the only relationships that (1) would satisfy their whole persons, and (2) could fulfill their created function in the primacy of relationship together in the likeness of the whole of God—not a fragmented God shaped in the likeness of their image (cf. Ps 50:21).



The process evolving from migrants to what the parable defines as a collection of orphans is a human dynamic that is rooted in the human condition of all neighborhoods. In my childhood neighborhood I enjoyed a taste of community, which didn't satisfy my need or fulfill my function but only pointed to the desire for *more*. So, what are you learning about your neighborhood?

Many neighborhoods perpetuate the human condition in its various forms. Unfortunately, many neighbors are complicit with this perpetuation and thereby occupy their role as a major part of the problem reinforcing and sustaining their neighborhoods, even neighborhoods comprised of God's people. The latter, with good intentions or not, by default perpetuate merely *a* kingdom as a substitute for *the* kingdom.

The parable of kingdom identifies various substitutes used to voice the kingdom of God. The reductions of God's kingdom from its wholeness is symptomatic of human endeavors from the beginning. These endeavors at building community may even have started with good intentions to address the human need. Nevertheless, they all still voice the insignificance of anything less and any substitutes used for the experiential truth of God's kingdom—*the* kingdom blessed by God's redemption of persons for the kingdom reality of their relationships together in wholeness (cf. Nu 6:24), the uncommon wholeness constituted only by and in the whole of God (cf. 2 Cor 3:18).



## **Chapter 2      The Sound of Voices and a Chorus**

The parable of kingdom encompasses voices each transmitting a sound, which can range from music to some listeners to dissonance to others—even the sound of silence. Music to the ears is problematic, however, because many listeners are captivated merely by reverberating music that does not get to the depth of the resounding music transmitting the voice of God’s kingdom.

### **The Sounds in the Parable**

What sounds good to you? This is a question that we must all understand, because it addresses how we respond to situations and circumstances in daily life.

The earliest group of migrants that was identified as God’s people formed their neighborhood in the midst of other neighborhoods. Initially, this group had distinct guidelines to distinguish its neighborhood from all the others surrounding them. The sound from this neighborhood reverberated to cause dissonance in the other neighborhoods. What could have had the potential to resound from the migrants, however, eventually became indistinguishable and even inaudible. How so?

As the migrants settled to establish their neighborhood, changes took place in how they lived. Even though they had nonnegotiable guidelines for their identity as God’s people, they were exposed to the voices of other neighborhoods; the sounds heard from others became influential to affect whatever consonance heard in their own neighborhood. This influenced the migrants in two key ways, which were and still are instrumental in causing dissonance in any neighborhood of God’s people.

First, as they became exposed to the sounds of how others lived in their neighborhoods, they became aware that others lived on their own terms. In other words, everyone did as they saw fit or what was right in their own eyes

(cf. Dt 12:8). Despite being warned not to listen to these sounds, this dissonance permeated their own neighborhood to the extent that the migrants also did as they saw fit or what was right in their own eyes (cf. Judg 21:25). Therefore, the influence from the surrounding neighborhoods composed a different sound from the initial consonance of God's people. The changing sound increasingly voiced their individual terms, and thus eventually into voices in discord.

The diversity of voices was assumed to be their right in a democratic neighborhood; and since there was no single dominant leader in the neighborhood to unify them, they simply existed amidst voices in discord. This amplifying human condition was the concern of an earlier neighborhood, which took it upon themselves to avoid and/or fix such discord amplified in this fragmentary human condition. Hence, this innovative neighborhood decided that the language voiced in any and all neighborhoods should have the same sound without variable discord. So, they constructed a systemic structure having the same frequency in order to unify a kingdom for the world (cf. Gen 11:3-4).

In their innovative terms, they assumed that if all the voices had a *common sound*, it would compose a chorus without competing voices. In spite of their good intentions, they only amplified at best a reverberation simulating a chorus for humanity. Well, such an illusion from human achievement did not impress God and thus was humbled. Nevertheless, that didn't stop others from attempting similar human efforts.

This raises a vital question essential for God's people, which the parable addresses:

Is God's kingdom composed by a common sound or an uncommon sound?

The 2<sup>nd</sup> major influence from the surrounding context that shaped the neighborhood of God's people brought a basic change to how this neighborhood operated. Since all the other neighborhoods had an authoritarian leader instead of a council of leaders like their unique neighborhood, God's people voiced a demand for a monarchy also. That is, they voiced the dissonant tune to God to live just like all the others. They no longer wanted to be unique or considered *different*, which they assumed was having an identity of being *less* than the others. So, they did not change their dissonant tune and thereby amplified their neighborhood according to their own terms (cf. 1 Sam 8:4-5, 19-20).

Taking on the identity of others in the surrounding human context implements the prevailing common sound of the human condition. This explicitly or implicitly involves the process of *commonization* that reflects, reinforces and sustains the human condition. Commonization among God's people is a critical problem amplifying dissonant sounds, which are out of tune with the *uncommon* sound of God's voice constituting God's people (cf. Dt 26:19). Therefore, no matter what simulated sound that a chorus of common voices can amplify and reverberate in an appealing frequency, such a chorus can never resound with the harmony of uncommon voices.

## **A Chorus in Harmony**

A gathering of voices may sing together in a neighborhood, and they may sing a melody together to sound like a chorus to appeal to listeners. Such listeners may even join in with the gathering to add voices to that chorus. In terms of quantity, their addition would certainly expand the neighborhood. The question key for the chorus, however, remains about its qualitative nature that is essential for the identity and function of God's people.

Many gatherings of God's people exist, for example, that sing a melody together to comprise a reverberating chorus to appeal to those gathered—not necessarily to God. Such gatherings establish their traditions to form the identity and function of that particular neighborhood; these traditions are typically composed by the quantitative terms forming the chorus for their neighborhood alone. The result has been the formation of a variety of choruses, which may or may not have any melodic connections with other neighborhoods among God's people. Also, the melody of a chorus may have such a reverberating sound so appealing that it becomes a mega-chorus.

The reality often exists, in fact, that these various choruses compete with each other for new voices to add to one's own neighborhood chorus. In competition or merely in maintaining one's own chorus, the identity and function of God's people have become fragmentary, because the whole of God's people no longer live as united together belonging to, in and for God's *chorus in harmony*. The existential reality of this pervasive fragmentary

condition often subtly exists beneath the sound of a chorus' melody, and thus goes undetected by those not listening carefully and paying attention completely.

This highlights in the parable the essential distinction between a chorus in harmony and a chorus merely with a melody. The latter is indicative of a chorus reduced to the sound of common voices, which is always something less or some substitute for the chorus constituted by the harmony of uncommon voices. This chorus in harmony must by its qualitative nature always resound the wholeness that only God gives, in order to be uncommon apart from the common that the surrounding contexts of the world give. Nothing less and no substitutes ever constitute the qualitative identity and function of God's people, who voice their everyday life in the harmony composed solely in the image and likeness of the wholeness of God.

For a neighborhood to bring variant voices together for its chorus to be in harmony takes work. This work involves less about quantity and more so about quality—that is to say, the quality necessary to be in tune with the voice of God. This necessitates (1) voicing our hearts in the qualitative image of God, and (2) involving our persons in relationships on the heart level in the relational likeness of God—not just part of God but the whole of God.

In other words, harmony among God's people requires the heart of each person beyond their vocal chords to be vulnerably involved in their relationships between them in order to be joined together in the uncommon peace of wholeness. Uncommon peace is the only wholeness in God's definitive blessing enacted on God's people (Nu 6:25) and given by Jesus to his followers (Jn 14:27). Therefore, solely from the irreducible foundation on this nonnegotiable basis does *the* kingdom of God rise as the chorus of uncommon voices in harmony both with God and each other. Thus, any and all neighborhoods of God's people should not confuse their melody with this harmony, as well as must not substitute any reverberating melody of their chorus for the chorus in harmony distinguished only by the wholeness of God.

How do you explain the current playlists used by many neighborhoods of God's people that are out of tune within the frequency for the wholeness of God's voice? And what is heard in the surrounding contexts of the world from these voices?

## Listening to the Correct Frequency of God's Voice

The parable of *the* kingdom sounds a chord that warns God's people to listen and pay attention to God's voice in order to make clearly audible its frequency, and thereby unmistakably distinguish God's voice from the voices speaking for God. The latter simulate the sound of God's voice, but they do not and cannot echo God's voice in the correct frequency. The sound from these substitute voices may have a melody appealing to others who don't truly listen and fully pay attention to what's transmitted. The consequence is that, in spite of an amplifying chorus in those neighborhoods, *the* kingdom of God never rises in their midst—only simulations or illusions of *a* kingdom.

Finding the correct frequency is always problematic to distinguish from other voices speaking for God, which prevails in many neighborhoods. Because whenever we don't listen carefully to the quality of God's voice—not merely hear the quantity of words—and pay full attention to the communication God shares in direct relationship with God's people (cf. Dt 30:20; Mk 4:24; Lk 8:18), then any references about God that are heard usually speak for God rather than God speaking.

The parable makes explicit that God's voice is always expressed, heard, and received only in the harmonious frequency transmitted by the qualitative and the relational. Furthermore, the parable conveys the truth that we are accountable for the sound that comes from our voice; and that to bear the identity as God's people, we are accountable to voice the correct frequency consonant with God's.

No matter the quantity of references that can be voiced about God, even with good intentions, or regardless of how much such voices can reverberate on behalf of God, the melody from these voices remain out of tune with the correct frequency of God's voice. Consider the following neighborhoods formed after their Master physically relocated; their identity was rooted in him but they functioned subtly in various ways dissonant with the harmony of his voice. The parable makes evident that these neighborhoods were not really rooted in the Master they claimed to follow. Sadly, the melody voiced by these neighborhoods represented the majority of neighborhoods at that time; and it became indicative of a majority identified with the Master ever since—variously out of tune with the words voiced directly from his mouth.

One of these neighborhoods to consider emerged with a reverberating melody that captivated those who heard its sound. This neighborhood kept expanding in members and gained a wide reputation popular for being so lively—an example of an appealing sound becoming a mega-chorus. In spite of the excitement its melody generated, this neighborhood later was subjected to the Master’s critique: “Wake up! You need to turn around from your ways because I have not found them to be *whole* by God’s perspective. Your melody represents in reality only a fragmentary condition that is not in tune with the correct frequency of the harmony communicated in God’s voice for the identity and function of God’s neighborhood in wholeness (cf. Rev 3:1-3).

The next neighborhood to consider voiced a melody pleasing to the surrounding context, which its affectionate faith served with goodwill. And the quantity of their good-faith actions kept increasing as they further engaged the surrounding context, even to the extent of compromising their values. As a result, this neighborhood formed a hybrid identity and function, which created dissonance in its melody that subtly caused it to be out of tune with God’s voice. Being out of harmony with God wasn’t apparent to them because outwardly they seemed to be in tune. Thus, the Master urgently gave them feedback to alert them of the truth resounding from God: “Let all my neighborhoods clearly know and fully understand that I am the one who searches your hearts and minds in order to deeply assess what you voice from inner out, not merely from outer in; and on this deeply significant basis I will respond to how you function accordingly” (cf. Rev 2:19,23).

Another neighborhood of this majority appeared to be in contrast to the two above. They knew that the common context surrounding them was basically contrary to their uncommon identity and function. Hence, they became a theological voice that vigorously opposed the common context in order to maintain their theological purity. In spite of receiving strong pushback from that context, they rigorously persevered and endured hardships for the Master’s name and didn’t become weary in the ongoing battle. Nevertheless, the Master clearly declared directly to them: “I have this critical issue to voice against you, which is irreducible and nonnegotiable for your identity and function as my neighborhood. You have forsaken your first love by abandoning your ongoing intimate involvement with me in reciprocal relationship together. Therefore, you must turn around and die to your dissonance in our relationship, so that we will be once again in the harmony of our relationship together in wholeness” (cf. Rev 2:1-6).



Previous to the above neighborhoods, there was news of neighborhoods that assumed they were part of the Master's kingdom. Why? Because they voiced the melody of prophesying in his name, as well as driving out demons and performing many miracles—all to the sound of his name. However, the Master told them in a resounding voice, "I never knew you," and thereby dismissed them from his presence (cf. Mt 7:22-23).

Only the sound from the Master's mouth voices the true frequency that will constitute his neighborhoods in the harmony of covenant relationship together. Even after he physically relocated, his voice is always palpable for his followers to respond to. For this reason and purpose, the Master made axiomatic for his kingdom:

Listen closely to the quality of the Master's voice, and pay complete attention to his communication shared directly in relationship with you!

Therefore, do not be misinformed or misled. His words are voiced only in relational language to communicate explicitly the nonnegotiable relational terms irreducibly constituting his kingdom harmony.



## Chapter 3

## The Covenant Tune

This parable provides diverse narratives of neighborhoods that have each gathered with an identity representing God's people. Since the beginning of this story, these diverse neighborhoods have used, modified or disregarded the guidelines (including parameters and borders) provided for God's kingdom. Even when the guidelines were used, those neighborhoods tended to operate merely with a Rule of Law, which only quantified God's Law in a *code of ethics and morality*. And such a code was variably observed as markers for their identity. This neighborhood practice, however, despite even rigid obedience outwardly to the Law, in reality reduced the terms that God constituted (not instituted), the terms of which composed the tune of the covenant for relationship together between God and God's people.

Therefore, it is imperative to understand that the only terms given by God to God's people voiced relational terms; these nonnegotiable terms encompass covenant relationship to define their identity and to determine their function—not a covenant based on a Rule of Law tuned to a code of ethics and morality.

What are the relational terms that God constituted for the covenant relationship of God's people, which definitively determine *how* God's people live daily as God's kingdom? Until we grasp this tune and live according to its frequency, our identity and function will always be something less or some substitute for the experiential truth and relational reality of God's kingdom. By countering that outcome and resounding this tune, the parable helps us distinguish *the* kingdom from merely *a* kingdom.

### The Faith of Covenant Relationship

The sound amplified most in neighborhoods identified as God's people is in the tune of faith. This tune is voiced by the language of faith, which would be expected to be voiced in a neutral language common to all these

neighborhoods. Yet, when the voices are not in harmony with the tune of faith voiced by God, the language of faith becomes biased to render it in different frequencies that are not neutral. Consequently, the language used to voice what sounds like the same melody in reality is voicing biases that reduce the meaning of faith and/or renegotiate its function and practice.

Consider the following bias in the language of faith and how it affects the practice of faith among God's people. The story involves the chapter that instituted God's neighborhood.

The people of God received the Law voiced by God in direct communication with them. At that point in history, however, the covenant was already constituted by God to build up God's people in the harmony of God's kingdom. God's Law signified further terms for the covenant, which God voiced to guide them in their daily faith in God in order to fulfill the covenant relationship between them. The Law, then, was only given as relational terms for the primary purpose of growing in their relationship together. Their daily faith revolved on their ongoing involvement directly in the primacy of this relationship that the Law helped guide them to grow in. Thus, merely observing the Law does not constitute their faith.

Unfortunately, God's relational terms voiced in relational language became transposed to referential language, language which merely transmitted the information of the Law to observe for their faith. Thereby, their faith came to indicate their belief in God and God's Law in the following ways: (1) God was reduced to merely the Object of their belief and not the Subject in relationship together, and (2) the Law merely informed them of how their faith should be practiced behaviorally, not relationally.

This transposed process from relational language to referential language increasingly prevailed to redefine faith from qualitative relational terms to quantitative referential terms. Having faith and observing the Law, in other words, became an end in itself—faith reverberated to the tune of “Have faith, have faith...!”—rather than as the means for ongoing involvement in relationship together. Moreover, this often subtle process created a bias among God's people to retune their faith, reverberate its practice and change how to relate to others. This has become the prevailing tune of faith voiced by most of God's people to institute the covenant for a kingdom. And just having faith regardless of situations and circumstances has become the badge of honor throughout these neighborhoods past or present.

In contrast, whenever God voiced the faith of God's people to believe, that belief was never an end in itself. Furthermore, faith voiced in referential language is cerebral and merely engaged the mind. Not only in contrast but also in conflict, faith in relational language always communicated to "believe **Me**"—not as the Object of your faith but as the Subject directly involved with you in relationship together. The reciprocal relational response and involvement from us is not merely to believe but to more deeply *entrust* our person to God in this relationship. Faith in relational language requires the heart of the person (along with the mind) to enact faith *as trust* with the whole person.

Therefore, entrusting our whole person in a relationship requires us to make our hearts vulnerable to the other person by trusting them for the relational outcome of our relational involvement with them. This relational outcome always has uncertainty unless you have the unbiased assurance that you can count on the other person for the relational outcome. This unbiased assurance cannot emerge from any other basis except the integrity of that other person. Accordingly, such trust cannot unfold from merely instituting faith, but it is only constituted as a relational reality by the covenant relationship enacted by the vulnerable presence and relational involvement of righteous God—whose righteous integrity can be counted on in relationship together.

In these essential relational terms and process, the faith of relational trust is enacted in direct response to the integrity of God ongoingly involved in covenant relationship for *the* kingdom. Anything less and any substitutes for this entrusting faith keep relational distance from God to prevent our faith from having the relational connection, involvement and outcome promised by God for covenant relationship together. This relational distance has been a pervasive issue among God's people, the condition of which simply reflects, reinforces or even sustains the human condition. Even with good intentions, whenever faith is mainly cerebral and does not primarily involve the heart, such faith is always voiced out of tune by a reduced or fragmented person.

Therefore, nothing less and no substitutes for a person's heart encompasses the depth of the whole person from inner out necessary for their vulnerable involvement directly in relationship together with God. This whole person's vulnerable relational involvement enacts the faith essential to "believe Me" in covenant relationship. And covenant relationship is enacted integrally with this faith by two relational terms, terms voiced by God which are irreducible and nonnegotiable to fulfill the covenant of God's kingdom.

## Covenant of Love

When God voiced the Law for the kingdom, its tune was summarized for God's people. They embraced the melody transmitted by the tune but didn't listen to its harmony. Thus, the summary was heard merely as the Book of Law (cf. Dt). Their tradition clearly stated (cf. Shema) that they were to listen to these terms from God: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart...with your whole person" (Dt 6:4-5). But they didn't listen to the whole tune of God's relational terms composed by relational language, because they only heard the melody of the Law in referential language. Consequently, they didn't pay attention to the harmony attuned to the relational language that voiced the summary not as the Book of Law but the Book of Love.

In the tune of God's voice, this Book is a love story; it unfolds the harmony of the relational terms for relationship together in wholeness (cf. Dt 4:37; 7:8; 10:15; 23:5; 33:3). In addition, the Messiah summarized the Law to clarify the view of an expert of the Law. He brought into clear focus that observing the Law necessitated the relational involvement of love: (1) first, in relational response to God, and (2) in all other relationships (cf. Dt 22:37-40). He thereby corrected any reduction of God's Law to a code of ethics & morality.

The harmony of God's voice constituted the kingdom's covenant as **the covenant of love**, the tune of which transmits a frequency not clearly heard in the neighborhoods of God's people. How so?

Love is a common melody widely heard among God's people, often to the tune of affection or some related emotion. The harmony of the covenant's love, however, eludes the tune voicing a popular language of love—a language quantifying the activity of what does, even in service or sacrifice for the benefit of others. This language elevates love to an ideal, whose esteem tends to be shaped by the surrounding context. Such love functions at best only to simulate the relational terms in the covenant of love. Yet, this is the kind of love used to idealize the identity and function of God's people.

Quantifying our identity and function based on the measure of what we do and accomplish is the prevailing approach to the practice of faith and gaining God's favor. In contrast and even in conflict, this is what God voiced directly to God's people as the only basis for having covenant relationship together: "I did not open my heart and choose you to be my people because of the quantity of what you did and possessed. Rather I vulnerably involved myself intimately with you on the basis of my love in order to constitute the harmony of our relationship together with the covenant of love, therefore on the basis of nothing less and no substitutes for my vulnerable relational involvement of love" (cf. Dt 7:7-9).

Listen carefully and pay attention completely, God's people! God's love is not defined by what God does, nor determined by what God gives you. First and foremost, God enacts love to us by vulnerably opening the depth of God's heart, and, on this irreducible basis, involves the wholeness of God's being intimately with us heart to heart for relationship together in God's very own kingdom. Furthermore, Jesus embodied the vulnerable involvement of this love, not by enacting his sacrifice but by enacting his presence with us heart to heart and his intimate relational involvement with us directly face to face. His love resounded to constitute the full significance of why he washed his followers' feet (Jn 13:1-17). Therefore, Jesus made it imperative that the harmony of his followers can and would only be constituted when we "love one another, just as I have loved you, you also need to love one another" (Jn 13:34).

Accordingly, on this unmistakable and irrefutable basis, the permanent constitution for God's kingdom is composed solely by the irreducible and nonnegotiable relational terms of Jesus' vulnerably intimate response and ongoing relational involvement with his followers. This constitution is neither a symbol nor optional but the relational terms essential to harmonize the covenant of love in the primacy of relationship together in wholeness. As his followers resound his relational terms for love in his relational likeness ("just as I..."), the harmony resonated will witness to all others in the world that they truly are his followers who belong to him in his kingdom. Thus, the constitution Jesus enacted for his kingdom remains today to define the identity and to determine the function of his kingdom followers, harmonized by the covenant of love in his qualitative image and relational likeness.

Given the irrevocable constitution for God's kingdom, are God's people going through a constitutional crisis by voicing the tune of *a* kingdom?

The ongoing constitutional issues for this reciprocal relational involvement of love remains focused on our relational response of love reciprocating in his relational likeness. God covenanted in the qualitative relational involvement of his vulnerable heart, which God will never terminate (cf. Jn 14:23; 15:9-10; 17:25-26; Rom 8:35-39). On this unmistakable and irrefutable basis, then, the covenant of love is irrevocable for God's kingdom. Now the question remains open for the quality of our relational involvement of love to fulfill our part of love's relational work, in order for the covenant of love to be reciprocated in the harmony resounded by those belonging in God's kingdom.

Is the love you experience or witness in the neighborhoods of God's people in tune with the covenant of love constituted in Jesus' relational likeness?

Jesus continues to be vulnerably present and relationally involved with us together with the Spirit. Their harmony resounds the wholeness of God, whose tune clarifies and corrects any reduction or renegotiation of the relational terms constituting the covenant of love for our wholeness in the qualitative image and relational likeness of the triune God.

## **Covenant of Peace (Wholeness)**

The parable further resounds the relational terms integrated for covenant relationship. The tune of relational terms was further constituted by God with the covenant of peace (cf. Nu 25:12; Isa 54:10; Eze 34:25; 37:26; Mal 2:5). This was necessary, so that God's kingdom is whole without any fragmentation in order for the neighborhoods of God's people to live in wholeness. The tune for peace, however, has commonly been heard by God's people in a frequency merely amplifying the absence of any conflict or unrest. While the absence of conflict is certainly a positive condition that would be desired and hoped for by most anyone, this is not the condition God constituted with the covenant of peace.



The language God voiced for peace (Heb, *shalom*) always denotes to be complete, whole, in wholeness. Wholeness is the complete condition that God's people are constituted in with the covenant of peace. This fine-tune harmony voiced solely by God for peace extended the relational terms of the covenant of love, the integral harmony of which together resounded the condition for God's kingdom.

The relational terms for the covenant of peace/wholeness are distinguished in the definitive blessing God enacts in direct relationship with God's people (cf. Nu 6:24-26). This blessing has become a tradition that God's people have simply reduced to a benediction for their gatherings. In contrast and conflict, God voices the definitive blessing illuminating the forefront of God's vulnerable presence with us (v.25), plus the relational reality of God's direct face-to-face involvement with us (v.26). The relational outcome from God's unwarranted relational involvement (i.e. grace) centers on the language of "give," which signifies to bring change to relationship so that God's people will be whole, in wholeness, and not merely have a semblance of peace as the absence of conflict.

God's covenant of peace clarifies and corrects the reduced language of common peace variably voiced in the surrounding contexts of human life, which invariably distinguishes the irreducible condition of uncommon peace (cf. Mt 10:34). Jesus unmistakably voiced the language of uncommon peace for his followers, in order that they will experience the harmony of the covenant of peace no matter what conflicts they face in everyday life (cf. Jn 14:27). Our wholeness is secure from the fragmentation of daily situations and circumstances, that is, is assured if we make "the peace of Christ the sole determinant for the depth of our whole person from inner out, who belongs together in one whole neighborhood" (cf. Col 3:15). Furthermore, as we incorporate the covenant of peace with the covenant of love, we will ongoingly experience the resounding integral harmony of God's uncommon chosen people in the wholeness of God's kingdom (cf. Col 3:12-14).

This is the wholeness God created in the beginning for humanity; and then God reconstituted in covenant relationship for God's people to be in the wholeness of relationship together, so that they will be and function in harmony with the relational likeness of God's wholeness. The relational terms for this relational process and outcome voiced by God are nonnegotiable—namely by the renegotiation to our terms that shape relationship together with something less or some substitute for wholeness. The condition of anything less and any substitutes is pervasive among God's people in neighborhoods assumed to represent God's kingdom.

The parable echoes God's relational terms to expose those out of tune with God's covenant, and amplifies the human condition reflected in their condition. This will make possible for God's people to be freed from reinforcing and sustaining the human condition dissonant with the qualitative image and relational likeness of the irreducible whole of God. God is only present and involved by nonnegotiable wholeness in order to reconstitute God's people in covenant relationship together as the *new creation* of God's kingdom (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17; Eph 2:14-17). This relational outcome is the redemptive change God gives in the definitive blessing (Nu 6:26).

Therefore, the peace/wholeness of and from God is never optional for God's people. Rather the uncommon peace Jesus gives is to define our identity and determine our function (cf. Jn 16:33; Rom 12:18; 14:19). Moreso, God's relational terms for the covenant make imperative that our whole persons from inner out are by necessity of our new nature to be vulnerably involved in our relationships with others in relational likeness of Jesus' love for us. While the simulations and related illusions of love and peace may reverberate in neighborhoods of God's people, God will never do relationship with them according to their terms to form a covenant of anything less and any substitutes. Thus, the parable of *the* kingdom keeps amplifying any dissonance and resounding the consonance with the tune voiced by God.

Who among God's people will listen carefully and pay attention completely, and thereby respond uncommonly with their whole person from inner out?

The voice of God's feedback continues to be present and involved:

"Wake up! I have not found your faith and ministry to be whole according to God's perspective" (Rev 3:1-2).

"You have become relationally distant from the love you first experienced" (Rev 2:2-4).

"Then all the neighborhoods in my name will know that I search and examine the whole person from inner out and will respond to them reciprocally" (Rev 2:23).

Even for those neighborhoods with a passive tune or a sound of silence:

“In my love, my tough love, I pursue them for the relational connection essential to turn their condition around in order to experience the relational reality of the resounding integral harmony of covenant relationship together” (Rev 3:19-20)

The parable closes this chapter by placing directly on us the responsibility of which kingdom unfolds from here. Nothing less and no substitutes for *the* kingdom is now dependent on our volition choosing the right tune in the correct frequency. Otherwise, *a* kingdom of anything less and any substitutes is a burden we have to bear for making the wrong choice, even by default.



## Chapter 4 The Parable of the Kingdom's Uncommon Family

Attention: The parable will conclude by resounding the following chorus in order for the neighborhoods of God's people to voice their tune in harmony with *the* kingdom, so that they will no longer be out of tune voicing the melody of *a* kingdom.

The relational outcome is that you are no longer marginalized at a relational distance,  
but you belong to the uncommon family of God.  
By the whole of God, this family is constituted to be in wholeness together,  
and thereby harmonized to be the very dwelling for the whole of God to live intimately. Ephesians 2:19-22

The parable of *the* kingdom, not *a* kingdom, observes many neighborhoods of God's people who actually are only looking at God's kingdom from the outside. Their position on the outside or even on the periphery of *the* kingdom's borders is obscured, because their perspective of kingdom does not reach the depths of *the* kingdom constituted by God. The parable concludes by taking *the* kingdom to the depths only God envisioned.

In the referential language common to humanity, kingdom is composed with the formality that renders highly privileged status to its leader(s). Those belonging to such a kingdom are classified as subjects loyal to their leader(s). In this formal structure and system, a kingdom's melody may reverberate throughout to unify this kingdom. That's how an early kingdom of God's people evolved in its story, and how many subsequent kingdoms have existed ever since on this widened path for kingdom.

This formality of kingdom amplifies with a select tune of nationalism, which is voiced by its select citizens. Currently, the majority voice of a notable neighborhood of God's people has become the most prominent tune heard for the melody of nationalism, which they assume defines the identity

and determines the function of God's kingdom. In God's name, these select citizens have bestowed on a reverberating individual the privileged status of a monarch ordained by God. And this neighborhood reverberates collectively with a melody tuned by its authoritarian leader.

In its current tune, however, nationalism subtly misinforms God's people and thus misleads them to be out of tune with *the* kingdom voiced by God. The parable makes apparent their dissonance by resounding the harmony consonant with God's kingdom, which, when carefully listened to and paid attention to completely, will rewire minds and turn around hearts. As this harmony comes to the forefront, the parable not only challenges God's people but can also threaten them, because its relational terms, process and outcome get to the heart of each person from inner out. Have you felt this way in what you've heard so far?

## **The Chord that Binds Together**

Jesus struck a chord that is rarely played by the neighborhoods of God's people. This results in a deaf ear to the sound transmitting God's kingdom. The most resounding tune for God's kingdom was voiced by Jesus when he communicated directly to his followers: "I will not leave you as orphans" (Jn 14:18). How so?

This story needs to be told centered on Jesus' relational message. His early followers, who first heard him voice these surprising words, must have been bewildered by his weird tune. Why, because all of them were part of a family. So, they paid no attention to his message since orphans, of course, do not belong to a family. This is true even though orphans are often gathered together in a structured context to serve as their family (orphanages). Whether alone or together, orphans pervaded neighborhoods.

Jesus wasn't planting a new seed about this condition, but he was further sowing the seed God already initially planted for the kingdom with covenant relationship. The condition of orphans exists explicitly and implicitly, and the story brings out this nuance. Both conditions signify not belonging to family; the former biologically and the latter relationally. Yet, the latter condition could also exist among those in the former condition, that

is, exist in biological families. The story makes explicit that these families contain or are composed of *relational orphans*. In other words, relational orphans is a prevailing condition needing loving response to resolve it.

In God's relational terms, the condition for orphans could only be turned around by the act of adoption (cf. Eph 2:5). Initiated by the unwarranted involvement of God's grace, the whole of God enacted the loving response necessary (cf. Rom 8:15-16). God's adoption, however, does not become the experiential truth and relational reality for God's people until consummated by the reciprocal relational response of their whole persons from inner out—that is, ongoingly entrusted (the essential act of faith) to the Father. This vulnerable relational response enacts the relational terms and work that fulfills the reciprocal relationship necessary to belong to and live in God's family.

When this reciprocal response is vulnerably enacted, these persons then function as God's very own children no longer apart as relational orphans but belonging to God's family. The relational outcome resounds the chord that Jesus completed to bind together the kingdom with daughters and sons, sisters and brothers constituting God's family in covenant relationship.

This family is an elusive family, namely when influenced and shaped by the human family (whether extended, nuclear, indigenous or migrant). What distinguishes God's family from human families is the essential fact that God's family can only be *uncommon* (holy), and thus clearly distinguished from the human family's *common* ways and means defining its identity and determining its function (cf. Isa 35:8; 1 Pet 1:15; 2:9-10).

For example, how do relational orphans grow up in biological families? They evolve by lacking meaningful relational connections, as well as not having significant relational involvement with each other that they can count on. These are essential to have so that they will not be alone in their everyday life.

Jesus enacted the relational process that removed the barriers preventing the relational connection and involvement in relationships. The relational outcome from Jesus' loving response thereby freed persons from inner out for the intimacy necessary to not be relational orphans in the context of God's kingdom family (Mt 27:50-51; 2 Cor 3:16-18). In this integral relational process, the relational terms enacted by Jesus are not mere rhetoric composing a belief system, but rather they constitute the relational outcome that "will not leave you as relational orphans."

Therefore, the parable clarifies the relational terms composing the condition of relational orphans and corrects the relational function of family, thereby resounding the harmony constituting God's kingdom only as the uncommon family. In contrast and conflict with the common family, God's uncommon family is joined together irrevocably in wholeness. The wholeness Jesus binds together is in consonant tune with both the qualitative image and relational likeness integrally in the harmony of the Father, the Son and the Spirit as One.

Yet, the wholeness of God's people as family can also be elusive and is not the prevailing condition in neighborhoods. Rather than transmitting the chorus harmonizing God's family, they merely voice at best a reverberating melody as children assumed to belong in God's family. Those associated with these neighborhoods typically base belonging to it by a formal membership, their roles in it, the spiritual gifts possessed or related resources, including even physical distinctions. All these distinctions used to define the person and determine their place in the neighborhood inevitably fall into a comparative process, which then stratifies their place in a hierarchy based on "better or less," "good or bad." Consequently and unavoidably, this process reduces some from being equal with others, and this clearly fragments any sense of wholeness they could experience together. Still, some would argue that Paul established the identity of God's people as coming together like the physical body, which would function on the basis of all its different parts and cannot be all the same (1 Cor 12:12-20). This is the chorus of the body metaphor that reverberates in many neighborhoods.

Given Paul's metaphor, how does a neighborhood body become one whole family?

The distinctions Paul identifies in the body are certainly real and necessary, because the body obviously cannot be composed with the same parts. At the same time, one part of the body cannot say to another part, "I don't need you, you aren't necessary." The underlying issue in all this is either defining the person from the outer in or from the inner out. The former bases the person on all their different distinctions visible from outer in, and thereby defines persons by these secondary things—all of which, again, fall into a comparative process. That's why God emphatically does not allow such distinctions to define persons and determine God's kingdom (cf. Acts 15:9). The reality of using such distinctions evolves both in the unavoidable consequence of creating inequality among members of the body and in the inescapable condition of fragmenting the body of its wholeness.

Can such a body of God's people voice the above chorus?



When Jesus' earliest followers focused on their distinctions and argued who was the greatest among them, they sheepishly asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" Jesus voiced this identity to them: "Unless you change from outer in and become vulnerable with your whole person from inner out in order to be openly involved without using distinctions for yourself—that is, openly involved just as a little innocent child who has yet to learn the common ways of life—you will not belong in my kingdom. Such a young child mainly lives from inner out at that early stage, and thus has little if any awareness of their personal distinctions emerging when viewed from outer in. Therefore, only such persons functioning like this child are considered 'the greatest' in my kingdom" (Mt 18:3; 19:14). Accordingly, no one should nor will be considered less and rendered to a lower status in *the* kingdom, though they certainly can and will be in *a* kingdom.

As the above chorus resounds, a body of inequality is unable to voice, much less resonate, the harmony of God's kingdom, much less become uncommon family.

Furthermore, the distinctions commonly used for a neighborhood's collective identity are the amount of its membership and attendance at gatherings, its activities, along with the resources it possesses. This bases its identity simply on quantitative distinctions from outer in, thus giving priority to secondary things to form a melody out of tune with the qualitative harmony of God's kingdom functioning from inner out that gives priority to the primacy of relationships together as uncommon family.

That's why Paul clarified in the body metaphor the essential function it needs to fulfill for the body to be whole and not fragmented:

Each part of the body must, by its nature as one body, be directly connected and deeply involved with each other, so that all the different parts of the body belong together in one whole body; thus no part can be separated from the whole or treated as *less*, and thereby be alone—alone as a relational orphan (1 Cor 12:22-26).

For this relational purpose to be fulfilled, Paul later made it imperative for all the neighborhoods of God's people: "Make the wholeness of Christ the primary determinant for the depth of your persons from inner out to function in relationship together as one body in the wholeness of God's family in relational likeness of God's love (your first love)" (Col 3:14-15; cf. Rev 2:4).

The relational outcome voiced by Paul is unmistakable and irreplaceable: the wholeness of equalized relationships joined together integrally with intimate relationships to constitute God's uncommon family.

Therefore, Paul harmonized in these reciprocal relationships together that the relational work of God's people integrally joins with the wholeness of God's relational work to confirm this irreducible and nonnegotiable outcome of God's kingdom—harmonized in the following chorus:

The relational outcome is that you are no longer marginalized at a relational distance like relational orphans; but you belong to the uncommon family of God. By the loving involvement from the whole of God, this family is constituted to be in wholeness together, and thereby harmonized to be the very dwelling within which the whole of God intimately lives. Ephesians 2:19-22

The parable keeps resounding the harmony for *the* kingdom's uncommon family to the only tune voiced by the whole of the Father, the Son and the Spirit together as One, thereby always transmitting *nothing less and no substitutes* in contrast and conflict with *anything less and any substitutes*. But, why does the parable conclude here with an unfinished sound?

Who is listening carefully and paying attention completely in order to respond in likeness and thereby belong to, in and for God's family?