

KENT ANNAN

**SLOW
KINGDOM
COMING**

PRACTICES FOR DOING JUSTICE
LOVING MERCY AND WALKING
HUMBLY IN THE WORLD

SLOW KINGDOM COMING

STUDY GUIDE

*Reflection Questions for
Individuals or Groups*

For Single- or Multiple-Session Use

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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

SINGLE-SESSION STUDY GUIDE

1. In the preface, the author suggests that we are “called to be part of God’s kingdom coming.” What does that calling mean to you?
2. In what ways have you experienced the guilt the author refers to in the closing paragraphs of the preface (p. 11)? How have you responded to that sense of guilt?
3. Read Mark 1:1-20 in the New Testament, a portion of which is included at the top of page 13. Look at the context for the statement “The kingdom of God has come near.” What does this passage say to you about how we are to “participate in the coming kingdom”?
4. The author suggests that the five practices are a means of realizing “deep instead of shallow change” (p. 18). What about this list of practices surprised or particularly resonated with you? Also, what is it about these five practices that gives hope for deep change?
5. In the chapter “Attention: Awakening to Justice,” the author asks us to spend five minutes thoughtfully pondering the question, “What breaks my heart?” Take time to do this. How do you answer this question? What response might that realization prompt in your life?
6. Confession is one of the five practices that lead to deep change and is called the “posture” we need for engaging in the process of realizing God’s slow kingdom coming. Which of the confessions modeled in this chapter resonate most with you? Why?
7. In “Respect: The Golden Rule for Helping,” we read that “we may not be offering respect, even if the goal is helping” (p. 64). Why would the author include the practice of respect as one of the five practices? What makes listening to others key to the Golden Rule (p. 66)?
8. The familiar starfish story (pp. 86-87) in the chapter “Partnering: *With Not For*” is used as an example of a common and problematic “guiding metaphor for how we help people.” What about the rescue of the starfish is problematic when applied to helping others?
9. The author says that “*Truthing*, as a practice, does not make truth an inanimate thing we can hold and control. Instead it’s a word of active following after what Jesus said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’” (p. 119). How is this concept of truthing different from other notions of truth you have encountered in the past? Why is this distinction important?
10. Reflecting on the writing of Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* (1418–1427) and his admonition to “fight bravely, for habit overcomes habit,” the author says “that is the hope and the work and the promise. We don’t have to be perfect, but we are invited, in the most meaningful commitment of our lives, to *practice bravely* because it leads to deep change” (p. 133). What invitation to practice justice bravely might you be receiving as you draw to the conclusion of your study of *Slow Kingdom Coming*? What would practicing bravely look like in your own life? And what would it look like in your church or charity work you might be involved in?
11. On page 134, the author crafts a variation on a beautiful benediction from the biblical book of Numbers. Read this benediction aloud, slowly, either alone or in your study group. Let its encouragement sink in as you contemplate your next step in the journey of doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly in the world.

MULTIPLE-SESSION STUDY GUIDE

This multiple-session study guide contains eight sections corresponding to the chapters in *Slow Kingdom Coming*. You can use one section per meeting for a total of eight sessions, or you can do two sections at each meeting for a total of four sessions.

PREFACE

1. If you're like most people, you live in a very fast-paced world. What prompted you to pick up a book with the countercultural title *Slow Kingdom Coming*?
2. Think of news headlines you've encountered in just the past week or two. What are the "big issues" found in those headlines that immediately come to your mind and prompt you to wish for God's justice to prevail?
3. In the preface, the author suggests that we are "called to be part of God's kingdom coming." What does that calling mean to you?
4. In what ways have you experienced the guilt the author refers to in the closing paragraphs of the preface (p. 11)? How have you responded to that sense of guilt?
5. The author suggests that the "five practices in this book can help you find the freedom to handle *what you can* and *what you're called to*" (p. 11). How do you receive the promise contained in that statement?
6. What are you sensing *you* are called to?

PARTICIPATING IN THE COMING KINGDOM

1. If you have taken justice- or relief-oriented trips such as the one that First Church took to New Orleans (p. 15), reflect on those occasions. What was the trip's purpose? How did you prepare for it? What went well, and what about the trip felt slightly "off" or as though it would have benefitted from more reflection and better practices?
2. Read Mark 1:1-20 in the New Testament, a portion of which is included at the top of page 13. Look at the context for the statement "The kingdom of God has come near." What does this passage say to you about how we are to "participate in the coming kingdom"?
3. The author suggests that the five practices are a means of realizing "deep instead of shallow change" (p. 18). What about this list of practices surprised or particularly resonated with you? Also, what is it about these five practices that gives hope for deep change?
4. In this chapter, we read that the five practices in *Slow Kingdom Coming* are "crucial because a paradoxical element of faith within our work for justice is that in a sense we believe the outcomes are completely up to God, yet in another sense it seems God has left the outcomes up to us" (p. 22). How do you respond to the author's portrayal of this paradox? How have *you* made sense of the paradox?
5. The author closes this chapter with the words, "Who we are determines how we act, and how we act determines who we are as we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly in the world" (p. 26). How do you respond to this challenge?

ATTENTION: AWAKENING TO JUSTICE

1. When have you been awakened to pursuing justice in the world? What prompted that awakening in your life?
2. Read the opening story about Calvary Church in Holland, Michigan, and its modeling of three elements of attention: awakening, focusing and renewing. How do you respond to Calvary Church's example? In what ways do you relate to this story, or how does it inspire you in your own pursuit of justice?
3. On page 32, the author asks us to thoughtfully ponder the question, "What breaks my heart?" Take five minutes to do this; or, if five minutes seems too long, take at least two. You can do this on your own or as a group.
4. How did you answer the question, "What breaks my heart?" and what might that realization be saying to you?
5. If you have been a part of a local church that you sensed focused its attention outward rather than just inward, what were the effects of that outward focus? How did that congregation help awaken its people to justice?
6. The author writes, "We practice awakening to justice by choosing who we talk with, what stories we read, what trips we take, what art we take in" (p. 31). How do you respond to his assertion? What are the implications of thinking in this way? What changes might you make in your own life to reflect an awakening to justice?

CONFESSION: THE POSTURE FOR ENGAGING

1. Different Christian traditions have unique expressions of the practice of confession. Take time to reflect on your own experience with confession. What place has it held in your life?
2. Confession is listed as one of the five practices that lead to deep change and is called the "posture" we need for engaging in the process of realizing God's slow kingdom coming. Why is confession the proper posture to pursue justice in God's world?
3. Which of the confessions of vulnerability included in this chapter resonate most deeply with you? Why?
4. The author writes, "If we don't lower ourselves before God and neighbors, we will fail at lasting change; we need to be transformed ourselves as we work for the world to become more just" (p. 44). What does it mean to *lower ourselves before God and neighbors*? Why is that essential?
5. Read Mark 8:23-25, portraying the story of Jesus' interaction with the blind man in Bethsaida. In what ways do you see Jesus leading the blind man step by step? Imagine yourself as the blind man. What do you think? Feel? Hope for?
6. The author calls this story one of "gradual healing" (p. 46) and suggests that confession of our temptations and vulnerabilities is tied to our own gradual healing, like the man in Bethsaida. In what ways have you experienced this to be true in your own life?
7. Read through the section "Confess Your Longing for Change" (pp. 59-62). Consider writing your own lament for the change that you desire, the change you believe God desires in the kingdom that is coming.
8. Why is it important to hold seemingly contradictory words such as hope *and* lament, longing *and* healing in tension with one another, and to do so before the watching world?

RESPECT: THE GOLDEN RULE FOR HELPING

1. This chapter begins with a quote from the poet and essayist Wendell Berry, who writes, “Respect, I think, always implies imagination—the ability to see one another, across our inevitable differences, as living souls.” Why is it vital that we see others—including the marginalized—as “living souls”?
2. The author suggests that there are times when “we may not be offering respect, even if the goal is helping” (p. 64). Why would the author include the practice of respect as one of the five practices?
3. What is the difference between applying the Golden Rule “systemically with a long-term view” rather than merely “individually with more immediate compassion payoff” (p. 65)?
4. What is it about listening to others that makes it key to the Golden Rule of respect (p. 66)?
5. In your own words, describe what it means to “listen incarnationally” (p. 70) to another person. Take a moment to write a paragraph that describes this practice. Why is this type of listening important in our pursuit of the slow kingdom coming?
6. How is our imagination connected to and a guide for our practice of respect (p. 72)?
7. *Slow Kingdom Coming* refers to a “place of privilege” on several occasions. How would you define the characteristics of a person or group who comes from a place of privilege? What kind of privilege, if any, have you benefitted from and how does that inform your pursuit of God’s kingdom?
8. On pages 74 and 75, the author proposes three questions that “can awaken our imaginations and put a sort of *respect tax* on the people traveling [on short-term missions trips] from a position of privilege.” Read each of these questions slowly and thoughtfully. How do you respond to each of them? How might they inform your practice of respect toward another person, community or people group?

PARTNERING: WITH NOT FOR

1. The familiar starfish story (pp. 86-87) is used as an example of a common and problematic “guiding metaphor for how we help people.” What about the rescue of the starfish can be problematic when applied to helping others?
2. This chapter suggests a number of ingredients for what the author calls an “equal agency partnership,” a model that better respects people as cocreators of their own lives with God (p. 89). Why would this model be preferred over the “rescue” or “fix it” models of partnership covered in this chapter? How does it capture the “*with not for*” essence of the chapter’s teaching?
3. The author depicts his extensive interactions with his friend Enel Angervil as he illustrates what an equal agency partnership looks like. What about their friendship and interactions stood out to you most? Why?
4. What does it mean to “listen humbly” (p. 89)?
5. Why is it important to recognize that “angels and demons” will be a part of even our best attempts at equal agency partnerships (p. 91)? How do we prepare for that reality?
6. Have you, like the woman in Florida (p. 95), faced a difficult relationship in your own family, workplace or community that seemed to have no positive way forward? In what ways might you apply the eight equal agency partnership elements to that situation? Take time to imagine what the result might be if you did.
7. What does it mean to “partner together with God”? In what ways have you experienced that type of partnership in your own life?
8. Dwell on the image of the icon by the Russian painter Andrei Rublev (p. 98). Imagine yourself being welcomed into participation with God and into participation with others through God as you work for justice in the world. Consider this compelling challenge: “Partnership is at the essence of who we are as people and how we are to act in the world” (p. 99). In what ways would your life be different if you lived out of this essence?

TRUTHING: HARD THINKING AND FEET ON THE GROUND

1. This chapter begins with a formula that says, “Truth multiplied by love equals a more just world” (p. 103). How do you respond to this formula? Why might it accurately be described as a formula for human flourishing?
2. What is the author driving at when he writes, “A similar process is important in the slow kingdom coming—an ongoing back and forth between the big picture and feet on the ground” (p. 105)? Why is this “aerial” and “up close” view important in matters of justice seeking?
3. The author says that “*Truthing*, as a practice, does not make truth an inanimate thing we can hold and control. Instead it’s a word of active following after what Jesus said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’” (p. 119). How is this concept of truthing different from other notions of truth you have encountered in the past? Why is this distinction important?
4. Take a moment to reflectively consider the following question: When have you “entered into the truth of other people’s lives” (p. 120) in the way this chapter suggests we should? In what ways did you see the world differently as a result of doing so?
5. Make a brief list of the ways in which you can enter into the truth of other people’s lives in the coming months.
6. The author suggests that as followers of Jesus we are compelled to be friends with people on the margins (p. 120). As you consider your church, your place of work, your family and your community, who are the marginalized that you need to befriend? What steps can you take toward making that a reality?

PRACTICING FAITHFULLY EVEN WHEN WE’RE OVERWHELMED

1. The author captures a scene from Nikos Kazantzakis’s autobiographical novel *Report to Greco* in which an old monk says he “hopes to lose” to God (p. 122). What does it mean to “lose to God,” and how are the practices in this book tied to that loss?
2. In this chapter, the author gives us five practical ways to keep moving forward when we find injustice all around us (pp. 123-26):
 - Leave behind what holds you back.
 - Step forward with faith.
 - Find opportunities for healing and reconciliation.
 - Renew a vision of mutual flourishing.
 - Find joy.
 - Which of these practical steps resonates most deeply with where you are today?
3. Reflecting on the writing of Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* (1418–1427) and his admonition to “fight bravely, for habit overcomes habit,” the author says, “that is the hope and the work and the promise. We don’t have to be perfect, but we are invited, in the most meaningful commitment of our lives, to *practice bravely* because it leads to deep change” (p. 133). What invitation to practice justice bravely might you be receiving? What would practicing bravely look like in your own life? And what would it look like in your church or community?
4. On page 134, the author crafts a variation on a beautiful benediction from the biblical book of Numbers. Read this benediction aloud, slowly, either alone or in your study group. Let its encouragement sink in as you contemplate your next step in the journey of doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly in the world.