

The Kingdom in Romans 14:17
(from “A Survey of Romans,” John Hepp, Jr.)

*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking,
but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Among the many references in the New Testament to God’s kingdom, this verse is unusual. It is often wrongly assumed to mean that the kingdom has begun and is wholly spiritual.

What Romans 14:17 Means & Doesn’t Mean		
Text	Meaning	Common Misunderstanding
<i>“For the kingdom of God is</i>	This introduces the essence of the worldwide kingdom that God has promised in the Scriptures and in which Jesus the Messiah will rule.	that the kingdom has already started
<i>not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”</i>	The promised kingdom’s essence is not material but spiritual.	that the kingdom is only spiritual in nature

A. The character of the coming kingdom. Since the promised kingdom will be God’s kingdom and eternal, its essence has to be spiritual. By no means, however, will it lack the material and political elements that were often predicted for it. As for politics, many prophecies agree with the following:

- “The LORD will be king over the whole earth” and “survivors from all the nations...will go up year after year to worship the King...and to celebrate....” (Zech. 14:9, 16)
- “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations....” (Rom. 15:12, quoting Isaiah 11:10)

As for eating and drinking, here are two samples:

- “The LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.” (Isa. 25:6)
- The Lord Jesus promised that “many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom....” (Matt. 8:11; see also Luke 22:29–30)

Romans 14:17 is not meant to deny such prophecies but to emphasize the kingdom’s spiritual essence. Although the verse makes an absolute statement (“is not”), it should be interpreted with a relative meaning (“is not primarily”). This is a common figure of speech known as “absolute for relative.”

B. The futurity of the kingdom. Believers belong to the kingdom simply because we belong to the King and His coming triumph (Matt. 25:31, 34). Speaking of that kingdom in the present tense, however, (“the kingdom **is**”) does not prove that it has begun. It is not unusual and not

confusing to speak in the present tense of something important yet future. For example, in Luke 20:35–36 the future resurrection is described with six present-tense verbs: “**marry...are given in marriage...can no longer die...are...are...**” The verbs are all present in Greek but refer to the future. Likewise, Romans 2:2 speaks of the future judgment in the present tense: “God’s judgment...**is** based on truth.”

However, most references to the kingdom either use future tense or logically refer to the future. Following, for example, are all the references to the kingdom by name in Luke 19–24 (all from NASB):

- “Because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately, He said therefore, ‘A certain nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return.’” (Luke 19:11–12)
- “When he returned, after receiving the kingdom.” (Luke 19:15)
- “When you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near.” (Luke 21:31)
- “I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:16)
- “I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.” (Luke 22:18)
- “Joseph...was waiting for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 23:51)

There is no way that this kingdom Jesus promised has actually begun. The Corinthians acted as though it had. “You have become kings —and that without us!” Paul ironically told them. “How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!” (Cor. 4:8).

Instead, Paul taught new disciples that they “must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). In that kingdom we will receive our inheritance.

- “Come...take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” (Matt. 25:34)
- “The wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Cor. 6:9–10; see also Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5.)
- “Has not God chosen those who are poor...to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised...?” (James 2:5)
- “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests...and they will reign on the earth.” (Rev. 5:10)
- At the seventh trumpet in his vision, John heard loud voices anticipating the conclusion: “You have...begun to reign...The time has come...for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints.” (Rev. 11:15–18)

The goal for us believers (as you saw in Acts 14:22) is to enter that kingdom and share that glory.

- “Live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” (1 Thess. 2:12)
- “Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us....The creation itself will be liberated....We wait eagerly for...the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom. 8:18–25; a liberated creation clearly implies an earthly kingdom.)

- “The Lord will rescue me...and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.” (2 Tim. 4:18; “heavenly” referring to its character, not its location.)

Therefore, the coming of the kingdom is the object of our prayers: “This, then, is how you should pray:...your kingdom come....” (Matt. 6:9–10)

In view of the coming kingdom, no sacrifice or suffering is too great:

- “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he...in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” (Matt. 13:44)
- “We boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring....You will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.” (2 Thess. 1:4–5)

In conclusion, Romans 14:17 looks at the Romans as heirs of the coming kingdom and obligated to live by its standards. As Paul said previously, believers should live “as in the day” (13:13) although the day has not yet arrived (13:12).