

**The Kingdom Within Reach: A First-Century
Vision of Theosis**

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Luke 17:20–21 (NASB 1995)

“The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There!’ For behold, the kingdom of God is ἐντὸς ὑμῶν [entos hymōn, “within/among/within reach”].”¹

Introduction — Reclaiming a Distorted Word

Theosis is not the idea that humans are divine and merely need to “realize” it. It is the confession that humans are not divine—and that only by union with Christ can we share in the incorruptible life that is His by nature and ours by grace.

This must be said first, or everything that follows will be misheard.

Theosis is a good word that’s been dragged through fog. To some ears it sounds like mystical absorption, to others like an “Orthodox-only” doctrine. In modern Western usage, it often gets reduced to spiritual elitism—something monks debate and laypeople ignore. None of that sounds like the first century. The apostles never used the term theosis, but they lived its reality. And what they lived wasn’t an inward treasure hunt for a hidden divine spark; it was a collision. Heaven stepped into reach. God’s reign, life, and glory moved from promise to presence.

The turning point is an often-misread line of Jesus: “The kingdom of God is ἐντὸς ὑμῶν.” For generations it was preached as, “the kingdom is within you,” as if Jesus were coaching Pharisees in contemplative spirituality. But the Greek phrase is plural and, in the usage of contemporary papyri, points to nearness—within reach, at hand, right here among you.² Jesus’ claim isn’t mystical; it’s confrontational: “The reign of God isn’t hidden inside you; it’s standing in front of you.”

That’s where authentic theosis begins—not with self-discovery, but with proximity to the King. Not by climbing into the divine realm, but by the divine King stepping into ours. The early Church did not preach that humans become gods by nature; they preached that humans are brought into God’s life by union with His Son. Or as Irenaeus would say a century later: God’s glory is a living human, and the human’s life is the vision of God.³ Radiance isn’t excavated from within; it’s received because you stood too close to the fire.

So if we’re going to speak of theosis the way first-century hearers would have understood it, we have to strip off the medieval haze and return to the dust of Galilee. To a rabbi answering impatient Pharisees. To a kingdom not buried in the soul, but within arm’s reach.

Setting the Scene: Pharisees, Expectations, and a Kingdom Question

The Pharisees weren’t asking about spiritual technique. They were realists living under Roman occupation. Their land, temple, and taxes were in pagan hands. Scripture promised that God would return to Zion, judge the nations, and restore His people under David’s Son (Isa 52;

Dan 7; Ps 2). So when they asked Jesus, “When is the kingdom of God coming?” it wasn’t an icebreaker. It was pressure: “If you speak for God, where is His reign? When will He act?”

For first-century Jews, “kingdom of God” (malkuth YHWH) didn’t mean “going to heaven when you die.” It meant God actively ruling on earth. It meant Rome humbled, enemies judged, the temple purified, Israel restored—God vindicated in public history.

Jesus answers with a reframing as bold as it is bracing:

- “The kingdom of God is not coming with things you can watch for.”
- “Nor will they say, ‘Look, here!’ or, ‘There!’”
- “For behold—the kingdom of God is ἐντὸς ὑμῶν.”

They asked when. Jesus answered with who.

They looked for signs on the horizon. Jesus pointed to Himself in their midst.

Set that inside the lively map of Jewish options:

| Group | Strategy for God’s Reign |
|-----------|---|
| Pharisees | National repentance and Torah fidelity to trigger divine action |
| Sadducees | Temple control and political management with Rome |
| Essenes | Withdraw to the wilderness; await apocalyptic intervention |
| Zealots | Take up the sword and force the issue |

Into those expectations Jesus announces an invasion without swords, desert communes, or political deals: the reign of God is appearing because the King is already here. The tragic edge of

the scene is obvious: they are waiting for the kingdom while looking directly at the King who brings it.

Jesus is not saying, “peer within.”

He is saying, “attend to Me.”

That is the soil where theosis grows—not in private mysticism, but in recognizing that God’s life has drawn near in a person.

What Does “ἐντός ὑμῶν” Actually Mean?

The weight of Luke 17:21 hangs on three words: ἐντός ὑμῶν. If we misread them, we inherit a spirituality Jesus never taught. If we read them in context, we recover the foundation of first-century theosis.

First, grammar: ὑμῶν is plural—“among you,” “in your midst.” Jesus is addressing a group of Pharisees He elsewhere calls “blind guides.” “Inside you” would be a strange compliment.

Second, usage: in non-literary Greek (letters, receipts, military notes), ἐντός regularly signals nearness and accessibility—within reach, at hand, to hand—not interiority. C. H. Roberts showed this from contemporary papyri decades ago; it never quite filtered into popular exegesis.

So the best sense is:

“The kingdom of God is within your reach / standing among you.”

This sharply contrasts with the Gospel of Thomas ³, which declares, “The kingdom is inside you and it is outside you.” ⁴ That’s a pivot toward esoteric interiority. Jesus’ claim, by contrast, is embodied, covenantal, and pressing: “God’s reign is at hand because I am.”

If the kingdom is within, theosis turns into self-discovery.

If the kingdom is within reach, theosis becomes encounter.

Kingdom First, Theosis Second

The early Church never announced, “You can become divine.” They announced: “God’s reign has arrived in Jesus—repent, believe, follow; share His life.” Everything begins with the kingdom.

Kingdom is not a place but a reign—God’s active rulership breaking in. That’s why Jesus’ works aren’t party tricks; they are royal acts:

- Forgiving sins,
- Healing the sick,
- Driving out demons,
- Raising the dead,

—all signs that God’s reign is touching earth (Luke 11:20).

Theosis is impossible without kingdom allegiance. You cannot share God's life while resisting God's rule. Jesus' first imperative isn't "discover your inner divinity," but "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17). Repentance is not vague sorrow; it's a realignment of loyalty—away from rival kingdoms (self, empire, empty religion) and under Christ's yoke. Union comes through obedience. Glory follows surrender. No one glows on the mountain who refuses to climb it.

Transformation Comes From Proximity, Not Introspection

Scripture's pattern is stubborn and simple: people change by exposure to God's presence, not by excavating an inner light.

Moses: his face shines not because he found divinity within, but "because he had been talking with God" (Exod 34:29).

Isaiah: he doesn't awaken holiness; a coal from the altar touches his lips (Isa 6). Holiness is applied, not uncovered.

Temple theology: holiness radiates outward—from God to people and things—never from people toward God.

Psalms 34:5: "Those who look to Him are radiant." Not those who look within.

By the time the New Testament speaks of believers being “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29) and “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4), the pattern is set: God draws near → humans draw near → humans reflect His life.

At the Transfiguration, Jesus’ face blazes like lightning. Moses reflected; Jesus reveals. He brings Peter, James, and John into that cloud—not to dissolve them into deity, but to preview what union with Him will mean: participation, not absorption.

Jesus as the Kingdom in Person

If the kingdom is within reach, it’s because a Person has arrived. The kingdom is not an atmosphere; it’s the reign of God embodied in Jesus.

“If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Luke 11:20)

John writes, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”—eskēnōsen, “pitched His tent” (John 1:14). Tabernacle language. The glory that once filled a tent now walks beside fishermen. Presence that once killed the unworthy now washes feet.

In Jesus, Israel’s promises converge:

| Promise | Fulfillment |
|--|----------------------------------|
| David’s Son will reign forever (2 Sam 7) | Jesus, Son of David |
| God will shepherd His people (Ezek 34) | Jesus: “I am the good shepherd.” |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| God will return to Zion (Isa 40) | Jesus comes to the temple, cleanses it |
| Son of Man receives dominion (Dan 7) | Jesus' own title for Himself |

If the King is God-with-us, then being near Him—following, loving, obeying Him—isn't mere discipleship. It is the beginning of theosis: humans share God's life because God has shared ours.

Union precedes transformation:

1. "Follow Me."
2. "Abide in Me." (John 15)
3. "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20; Acts 2)
4. "Then the righteous will shine like the sun." (Matt 13:43)

Glory is not payment for good behavior. It is the outcome of staying close to Christ.

Participation Language in the New Testament

The NT never uses theosis, but it speaks in the grammar of union, participation, adoption, and glory.

John 1:12–13: "To all who received Him... He gave the right to become children of God." Identity follows reception. Theosis—if we use the term—begins with the One you receive from outside.

John 17: Jesus prays that we would be *‘‘in Us’’—*union without confusion, participation without absorption.

2 Peter 1:4: ‘‘partakers (*koinōnoi*) of the divine nature.’’ Sharers, not possessors; incorruption and holiness, not equality of essence. Participation is moral, eschatological, and relational, grounded in promises fulfilled in Christ.

Romans 8: From foreknowledge to glorification, the chain pulls us toward conformity to the image of the Son. Suffer with Him → be glorified with Him. Theosis is cruciform before it is luminous.

Paul’s participation lines are everywhere:

- ‘‘Christ lives in me.’’ (Gal 2:20)
- ‘‘One spirit with Him.’’ (1 Cor 6:17)
- ‘‘Christ in you, the hope of glory.’’ (Col 1:27)
- ‘‘Beholding... we are being transformed into the same image.’’ (2 Cor 3:18)

Participation always rides with presence, obedience, and the Spirit (John 14:23; Rom 8:11). This is not escapist mysticism; it is embodied allegiance.

Early Church Voices — Theosis Without Mysticism

By the second century, the Church speaks about sharing God’s life with striking clarity—incarnational, covenantal, ecclesial.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110) emphasizes attachment to the living Christ: “One Physician, of flesh and spirit... God in man.”⁵ He longs to “receive the pure light,” not to become a god by nature, but to become truly human in union with the God-Man.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180) supplies the classic formula—often misused later—“The Word... became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is.”⁶ In context, he means incorruption, adoption, restored likeness—not metaphysical fusion. Salvation is social and sacramental: inside the Church, by faith, obedience, and suffering—not by secret knowledge.

Athanasius (4th century) is quoted for, “God became man so that man might become god,” but he means sons by grace, not gods by essence. In *On the Incarnation*, deification is welded to Christ’s humanity, cross, and resurrection.⁷ It is adoption, incorruptibility, communion—never absorption.

Common thread:

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Theme | Early Witness |
| Source of divine life | The incarnate Son |
| Means of participation | Faith, baptism, Eucharist, obedience, martyrdom |
| Goal | Incorruption, restored image, glory |
| Nature of change | By grace, not nature; adoption, not essence |
| Error opposed | Gnostic interiority and elitism |

They never said, “Look within to find the kingdom.” They said, draw near to Christ.

Why Luke 17:20–21 Matters Now

This isn't a lexical skirmish. How we hear ἐντὸς ὑμῶν divides two spiritualities:

- “Within you” → theosis as self-realization, therapeutic and private.
- “Within reach” → theosis as encounter with a present King, covenantal and public.

Jesus' words also warn: the kingdom can be near, and you can still miss it. You can memorize Scripture and refuse its Author; debate righteousness while crucifying the Righteous One. Standing inches from the gate is not the same as entering.

If the kingdom stands within reach, theosis isn't self-discovery; it is self-surrender. The right question isn't “Is the kingdom in me?” but “Am I in the kingdom?”

Part IV — Life in the Kingdom: Theosis as a Way of Being

How Theosis Is Lived: Union, Obedience, Table, Fire

Theosis cannot be reduced to a doctrine to be admired. In the first century, it was a way of life—ordered around the living Christ, enacted through the body, and sustained in the fellowship of the Church. If the kingdom stands “within reach,” then theosis is simply what happens to a person

who draws near to the King and stays near Him. Transformation is not instantaneous and not automatic. It unfolds through allegiance, imitation, communion, and endurance. The New Testament describes this not as ascent, but as abiding. The branch bears fruit by remaining in the vine (John 15:4–5). Participation in divine life is sustained by proximity to Christ.

1. Union Begins with Allegiance

Theosis begins when a person decisively transfers their loyalty. Jesus' call, "Follow Me," was not a suggestion to admire Him from a distance. It was a summons to leave competing allegiances and reorient one's life around His reign. Repentance is not merely sorrow for sin; it is the abandonment of old masters. "No one can serve two masters" (Matt 6:24). Theosis assumes this clarity. One does not share the life of God while continuing to cling to self-rule.

Baptism was not a symbolic gesture; it was an act of transfer—from the dominion of death into the life of Christ (Rom 6:3–11). The baptized believer belongs to Him. Theosis begins here: "You are not your own... you were bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:19–20). Union precedes transformation.

2. Obedience as Participation in Christ's Life

After allegiance, theosis progresses through obedience. This is not moralism. It is participation. To obey Christ is to live His life in the world. Jesus does not ask for admiration but imitation: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). The shape of theosis is cruciform before it is radiant. "If we suffer with Him, we will also be glorified with Him" (Rom 8:17).

The Spirit reorders desire. Where the heart once strained against God's commands, it now bends toward them. This is gradual. We "are being transformed" (2 Cor 3:18). Theosis moves at the pace of love.

3. Beholding the Glory of Christ

Transformation happens by beholding Christ. Moses' face shone after speaking with God (Exod 34:29). Radiance comes from exposure, not excavation. Paul writes that believers are "transformed... as they behold" Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Christ is seen in Scripture, prayer, worship, and the lives of the faithful.

4. The Eucharist as Actual Participation

The Eucharist is participation (*koinōnia*) in the life of Christ (1 Cor 10:16–17). Just as food becomes part of the body, so Christ's life nourishes the believer. Union is renewed at the table. To receive Christ while resisting obedience is contradiction (1 Cor 11:27).

5. Communion with the Body

Theosis is not individual. Believers are formed **together** (Rom 12:4–5). No one becomes Christlike alone. The shared life of the Church—confession, correction, fellowship, forgiveness—shapes the believer.

6. Endurance Forms Glory

Theosis matures through endurance. The New Testament joins glory to suffering (Rom 5:3–5). The believer walks the same path as Christ: humility, obedience, suffering, resurrection, glory.

7. The Slow Brightening

Theosis is gradual. The early Church compared it to iron placed in fire: the metal remains metal, but takes on the properties of flame. The believer remains human, but begins to bear divine likeness: mercy, purity, peace, self-giving love.

The outcome of theosis is not escape from the body or absorption into divinity. It is the restoration of the image of God—reflected in a life lived in union with Christ.

Two Counterfeits to Avoid

If theosis is union with Christ leading to shared participation in His life, then distortions arise wherever Christ is displaced—either by the self or by spiritual ambition.

1. Interior Mysticism Without Obedience

This form treats the kingdom as something found by turning inward. It confuses spiritual sensitivity with transformation. But Jesus does not say, “Look within.” He says, “Follow Me.” Theosis is not discovered by introspection but lived through allegiance and obedience. Holiness is received by drawing near, not uncovered from within.

2. Spiritual Triumph Without Cruciformity

This form seeks glory without the cross. It speaks of identity, authority, and power, but resists suffering, humility, and endurance. Yet Scripture teaches that we are “glorified with Him” only if we “suffer with Him” (Rom 8:17). Theosis is cruciform. Christ’s glory follows His humility (Phil 2:5–11). Any theology that offers radiance without surrender obscures Christ.

Both counterfeits separate what Scripture holds together: presence and obedience, union and discipleship, Spirit and cross. True theosis is a life shaped by Christ’s life—received, obeyed, endured, and reflected.

Conclusion — The Kingdom Is Close. Are We?

Jesus did not tell the Pharisees to look within. He told them the kingdom was already within reach—standing before them in His own person. That single correction resets the conversation about theosis.

Theosis is not humanity climbing to divinity; it is divinity coming near to humanity. Not an inner spark to be fanned, but a Kingdom to be entered. It does not begin with self-knowledge; it begins with knowing Christ. It does not grow by turning inward, but by turning toward Him—“the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb 1:3).

From Moses’ shining face to Isaiah’s cleansed lips, transformation has always come from drawing near. In Christ that pattern intensifies: God no longer waits on the mountain; He walks our roads. The kingdom doesn’t wait for us to ascend; it arrives embodied. From that moment forward, theosis takes its true shape:

God became what we are, that by union with Him we might become what we were made to be.

This isn't poetic flourish; it's apostolic backbone: receive Him—become God's children; Christ in you—the hope of glory; beholding Him—transformed into His image; suffer with Him—be glorified with Him. The early Church preached adoption, participation, glorification—not self-deification. They pointed not to the soul as the source of divine life, but to the Son—crucified, risen, reigning, returning.

Which leaves us here: if the kingdom is at hand, the question is not “Where is He?” The question is “Where are we?”

Proximity before transformation. Allegiance before participation. Union before glory. One day the righteous will “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:43). That belongs to those who stepped into the kingdom when it stood within reach.

The kingdom is close. The King is present.

Are we?

Endnotes

1. Scripture citations are from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update (NASB 1995) unless otherwise noted.
2. C. H. Roberts, “The Kingdom of Heaven,” *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948): 1–8. Roberts marshals papyrological parallels for ἐντός indicating within

reach/at hand, supporting a rendering of Luke 17:21 as “within your reach/among you.” See also Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἐντός, which notes the Roberts discussion albeit briefly.

3. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.7; 5.Preface, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885). On “the glory of God is a living man,” see AH 4.20.7; on the exchange formula (“He became what we are...”), see AH 5.Pref.

4. Gospel of Thomas, logion 3, in Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 376–77. The logion’s emphasis on interiority (“inside you and outside you”) reflects an esoteric trajectory distinct from Luke’s embodied, covenantal frame.

5. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* 7; *Letter to the Romans* 6, in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

6. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.Pref.; 3.19.1. For Irenaeus’ image/likeness distinction and anti-Gnostic polemic, see John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 156–78.

7. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54; see also 8–10, in John Behr, trans., *On the Incarnation* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011). On “become god,” Athanasius consistently frames deification as adoption and incorruption by grace, grounded in the incarnation, cross, and resurrection—not assimilation to divine essence.

8. For New Testament participation language, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 19–25 (on “in Christ” as participatory category); and Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

9. On kingdom as reign (not place), see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 202–12; and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 102–5.

10. On Second Temple expectations and the spectrum of Jewish “kingdom strategies,” see E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), 239–70; and Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1–4 (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes).

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