

Life in the Upside-Down Kingdom

by Dr. Timothy J. Keller

He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

Looking at his disciples, he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:17-26).

This Sermon on the Mount is a classic place in the Bible to find a picture of what it means to live as a Christian in the world. It answers questions such as, What exactly is newness of life? What does a resurrected life consist of? Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount more than once.

In Luke 6, when Jesus preached the same sermon, he didn't say as much as He did in Matthew 5-7. It is interesting that both accounts are associated with a mountain. Matthew 5:1 says He went up a mountainside. Luke 6:17 says He came down. Jesus had been on a mountainside, teaching His disciples.

Why does Scripture include this detail about a mountain? From what we can tell, Jesus preached this sermon in the mountains above and north of the Sea of Galilee. These mountains had the very same function that mountains have had for centuries. If you were a revolutionary or wanted to bring in a new kingdom or new administration, you were a hunted man. So you would hide out in the mountains. Just as the revolutionaries hide in the mountains, so Jesus Christ goes to the mountains: He is bringing about a revolution. He is a subversive. In the first verse of His sermon, He says, "I am coming to bring a new administration. I'm coming to bring a kingdom, a new kingdom to replace the old kingdom" (v. 20). Now, when you understand what He says this kingdom is, you realize that every other revolutionary who ever lived was really just trying to make small, fine tunings to the old kingdom, to rework or reshuffle it. Jesus Christ brings the most radical revolution

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because the *pattern of values, power, and product* of His kingdom are utterly different.

First, every kingdom or new administration has a *pattern of values*. If a coach takes over a team, he immediately says, "I know the last coach wasn't into conditioning, but I am." New management will bring in a new pattern of values.

Second, a kingdom has the *power* to implement the pattern of values. The coach decides who plays and who sits on the bench. He has the final say about how the game is to be played.

Third, there's always a *product*. When the pattern is implemented, it will have an effect. When the coach comes into power and puts his program in place, the team will either win or lose. Will the players reach their potential? Will the morale go up? What will happen? A kingdom always has an impact, an influence, a result in people's lives.

Jesus Christ shows us the pattern, the power, and the product of His kingdom in contrast to the kingdom that it replaces, which has a wholly different pattern, power, and set of results (Luke 6:20-26). Be aware that you are a citizen of one kingdom or the other: there are only two kingdoms. Paul says, "He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of His dear Son" (Col. 3:1). You are either a citizen of Jesus' kingdom or a citizen of the kingdom of darkness.

Similarly, in Romans Paul's point is: "The night is far spent. The day is at hand. Live as in the light." Spiritually we are in the dawn of the history of the world. It's not day, and it's not night: they are both happening. If you've ever been around dawn, you realize the day is coming, while the night is leaving. Paul says to make sure to live as in the light. You better dress and get ready as if the light is coming, because it *is* coming. Don't be fooled by the darkness. Even though you may be a citizen of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the influence of the old kingdom can still be felt. Not only are there two kingdoms, but the pattern of the two kingdoms is absolutely critical to understand if you want to live as a Christian, in newness of life.

We will look briefly at the old kingdom, the kingdom that Christ is replacing; and then we will look a little more extensively at the new one. I'm going to call the old one "the right-side-up kingdom" and the new one "the upside-down kingdom." Every kingdom has certain values. There are always certain things you put on the top and certain things you put below. Certain things appear to us as good—our priorities. Other things do not seem very good. These are things we avoid and stay away from.

In the old kingdom that Christ replaces, the right-

side-up kingdom, these values are on top: power, comfort, success, and recognition (Luke 6:24-26). The first people-group Jesus identifies with the right-side-up kingdom is the rich. Riches and poverty are really a matter of power. The second group is the well-fed. They are concerned with material comfort: nice clothes, great restaurants, beautiful homes. The third group is those who laugh. The word used for laugh here is a negative word. The experts in Greek will tell you it is a word that means basically to gloat. When you've won the election, it's only the party that counts. I won; you lost. It does not refer to fun and happiness in general, but to success, the party you have after you got the pro-

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motion, the party you have after beating the other candidate, and so on. The fourth group Jesus cites is those of whom men speak well. Recognition, acclaim, popularity, celebrity: these are the values of the kingdom Christ replaces.

Now let's examine the opposite values which the right-side-up kingdom puts down: things to avoid, things we disdain, things we sneer at. Verses 20 to 23 spell these out as weakness, sacrifice, grief, and exclusion. You're excluded. You're weeping. What do we do with weakness, grieving, sacrifice, and exclusion? We do everything we can to avoid them! Instead, we opt for the values of the right-side-up kingdom because they seem utterly natural to us: power, comfort, success and recognition are our priorities. The power of the right-side-up kingdom is the power of the *now*. You're laughing *now*. If you aim for happiness, recognition and acclaim, these things pay off. They give you results. If the *now* is all there really is, if this world is all there is, this set of values seems absolutely, biologically natural. Have you ever heard of the survival of the weak, the rejected, or the sacrificing? Forget it! Biologically those are totally unnatural. Instead, it makes sense to talk of power. It's "psychologically" natural. I found this interesting quote by a prominent British psychiatrist:

The spirit that so permeates Christianity is, in my opinion, masochism. The strongest expression of masochism is to be found in Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. This blesses the poor, the meek, the persecuted, to do good to them that hate you, and forgive them their trespasses. All this breeds masochism.

Because the kingdom I call right-side-up seems biolog-

ically and psychologically natural, who then would value weakness or sacrifice? Who would tolerate grief, exclusion or rejection? What's the product?

Jesus says that when you live according to the values of the right-side-up kingdom, when you are driven by the power of the *now* because of its results, it's only temporary. You may laugh now, but later you'll weep. You may be filled now, but later you'll be empty. He speaks from common sense. If you say the *now* is all that matters, who knows about eternity or other things? If you build your life on the *now*, you get results in the *now*, but the plain fact is that these things have to crumble eventually. If you build your life on your beauty,

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your beauty is going to fade. If you build your life on people who love you, they're going to die. If you build your life on achievement and power, your records will be eclipsed. Also, if the *now* isn't all there is, if there actually is an eternal world, then, of course, people who build their lives on power, comfort, success, and recognition will find their full stomachs turning into cosmic emptiness. Their laughter will turn into cosmic grief and weeping.

Someone might ask, How do we know that Jesus is right? Out in the world, there is no doubt that the right-side-up kingdom seems to make the most sense. Any other approach seems like suicide! Why would you value weakness? Who would do that? Why would you value sacrifice? Why would you value tears? What Jesus holds as true goes absolutely against everything we believe. So why should we believe Him?

I read a good commentary on this chapter. The commentator pointed out that Jesus came down from the mountain healing and feeding. Power went out from Him in miracles. The commentator said, "The handwriting is on the wall." In Daniel 5, Belshazzar was the last king of the Babylonian empire. When Cyrus the Persian closed in on the city, King Belshazzar knew he couldn't possibly win and that his empire would be over, so he threw an enormous party. Everyone got drunk, and he brought in his concubines. Suddenly handwriting began moving across the wall. It basically said, "Your days are numbered!"

When Jesus Christ showed up and began to heal the sick, raise the dead, feed the hungry, and die on a cross,

that was the handwriting on the wall for the old kingdom and the old ways. If you are living for yourself, if you are spending all your money on yourself, if you are not living like Jesus Christ lived, if He really did come and really did those miracles, that means you're like Belshazzar, having a huge party, and your kingdom is about to crumble. The handwriting is on the wall. It gave me a chill when I realized that the commentator meant for us to ask ourselves these questions: "Was there a Jesus Christ? Did He live the life He did?" If He did, then the shutters will come down on the kingdom of living for myself, rising to the top, doing everything I can for success, throwing a few baubles to the poor on the way, occasionally going to church if things seem unhappy, while always sticking around with people of my own caliber. But the upside-down kingdom is absolutely the only way to go because Jesus Christ lived the life He did, touching the lepers, giving Himself to the poor, dying on the cross, coming as a poor man, riding into town on a borrowed donkey, eating his last meal in a borrowed room, being buried in a borrowed tomb, and giving up everything. This is the handwriting on the wall for anybody who will not live according to the pattern of Jesus' life.

You say, "I don't know if Jesus ever lived. I don't know if He ever did these miracles. I don't know if He did any of these things." Then you need to look at that. That's not what we're talking about today. We're not talking about how we know if Jesus lived and died. I'm not going to give you the evidence or take you to the text. But if He lived a life anything like what the Bible says, your days are numbered, Belshazzar, unless you live a life which is upside down from the way the world thinks things should go.

What else can we learn about the upside-down kingdom? Michael Wilcox wrote this in a commentary on Luke:

In the life of God's people, it will be seen first of all a remarkable reversal of values. The people of God will prize what the world calls pitiable, and suspect what the world thinks desirable.

In other words, the mark of what makes you a Christian is a reversal of values. The things that the world considers pitiable we prize. Wait a minute! We prize weakness, sacrifice, grief, and exclusion? Are we the masochists that the psychiatrist said we are? The answer is that to prize is not the same as to seek. In fact, if you seek it, you're just as controlled by the old world's values. Prizing means that when it comes, we see its value and we understand what it's doing in our lives. When it comes, we don't say, "Oh, my word, my life is over!" If you say, "My life is over!" when weakness comes and all these things hit you, you're under

the influence of the old world, the old kingdom, the kingdom that's being replaced, the kingdom against which the handwriting has been written. We are able to prize what seems pitiable because when it happens we know its value, and we prize the people who are going through it. We're attracted to them. We get into their lives to try to ameliorate their lives.

Let me break this down. Let's look at the pattern, the power, and the product of the upside-down kingdom.

First, the pattern of the upside-down kingdom is a reversal of values with regard to the world. In other words, Christians are no longer *controlled* by the things that the world thinks are so critical. We're not *controlled* by power, success, comfort, or recognition. Even if you can't stand the world's values, you run away from them, and you have no idea what to do with recognition, you are still controlled by them! You're scared of them. It probably means that deep down you're intimidated by them or you still really want them. But a person who is a Christian, who is living in the upside-down kingdom, isn't controlled by these things. You don't need them, which means you don't want them. They don't drive you; they don't control you. You can take them or leave them. That is the first mark of somebody who is living in the upside-down kingdom; it's the pattern of your life.

For example, here's a non-Christian and a Christian standing alongside each other. Here's a member of the old kingdom; here's a member of the new kingdom. Let's not talk about Christian/non-Christian for a second. Here's a person who is being controlled by the right-side-up kingdom and a person controlled by the upside-down kingdom. Let's say they are both in the same situation: they are about to lose their jobs. A person who is under the influence of the old kingdom, the right-side-up kingdom, is going to have to lie if he will keep his position at work. Why? He is a slave. He can't do without that house in Greenwich or power, comfort, and success. But a Christian says, "I have to do whatever is necessary because these things don't bother me anymore." Where does that come from? The answer is that there are a number of wonderfully paradoxical statements in Luke 6 which tell you the secret dynamic.

First of all, notice that all the way through Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now." "Blessed are you who hunger now." Look at the paradox. Do you know what that means? First of all, you're weeping now. Something is going wrong in your life. But you're blessed. The word "blessed" means deeply satisfied. Jesus says that a Christian is somebody who can weep and still be blessed. If a person living under the old kingdom loses his job, a loved one, or his reputation,

and blessedness and laughter go together, blessedness and weeping can *never* go together. But in the new kingdom, they do go together because there's a blessedness that doesn't have to do with circumstances.

Another place that shows the paradox is where He says, "Rejoice and leap for joy in that day, for great is your reward in heaven" (Luke 6:23). Karl Marx used to look at verses like this and say, "That's what I hate about Christianity! The opium of the people. Great is your reward in heaven! I'm supposed to trudge through life and not fight injustice and just accept my lot in life because later on I'll have pie in the sky, by and by, in the future?" But there's no future here. It's not in

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the future tense. That's not what's going on, Karl Marx. I'm sorry you can't be here to hear this! What it says is, "Rejoice in that day." What day? Not the judgment day, but in the day that you're excluded. Verse 23 refers to verse 22. How can you rejoice in that day? Because great *is* your reward in heaven, not "will be." Consider Colossians 3 and Acts 7. I've never gotten over Acts 7. Here's Stephen about to be stoned to death, about to be executed. How is he going to handle it with courage and love? How will he keep from fear and anger toward the people who are doing this great injustice? He looks to heaven and suddenly says, "I see the glory of God and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of the Father." In other words, he says, "I realize that though down here this kangaroo court is doing injustice to me, before God I'm vindicated." A Christian is somebody who says, "I have set my mind not on things below but on things that are above, for my life is hid with God in Christ" (Col. 3:1). A Christian is somebody who says, "I've lost recognition, but I'm famous with God." That's weeping but blessed. "I've been excluded, but I'm welcomed by God." That's exclusion but leaping for joy. Because as a Christian you have that pattern, you're not controlled by the world's values. You're living a free life. That's the reversal.

Do you realize what this means? Karl Marx is utterly wrong. If this world is all there is, and if working for injustice means losing my job, my reputation, or my life, then I won't do it. But if I have a blessedness and I can leap for joy because of my *standing* in heaven now, I see my standing in heaven. That means I can work

against injustice. So what if I lose my reputation or my life? If I see injustice in my neighborhood, I stand up against it. So what if I'm ostracized? If I see injustice in the company, I blow the whistle. So what if I lose my job? You ask, "Who lives like that?" You have the resources to live with that kind of integrity and courage. This is not the opium of the people, but the smelling salts! This will wake you up! If this is true, not only will you live with integrity, but you will no longer have to have these things or not want to have these things. You won't live a bitter life if somebody takes

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what you want away from you. That's the pattern. The pattern is you have a complete reversal because you are free from the world's values.

Second, where do you get the power for this? Verse 19 says you get it from Him. Jesus Christ's life is an example of the very way in which we're supposed to live. Jesus comes into the world poor even though He's the king. He even talks about it here. He says, "Don't be upset if you're excluded, rejected, a failure, or if you are weeping. This is what has always happened to the prophets." Have you ever heard of a successful, happy, or popular prophet? Do you see what Jesus is saying? If it's true that the prophets have always lived according to these values, how much more the great, true, ultimate prophet? If the representatives of the king live this way, how much more does the real king live when He finally comes? When He comes, you see Jesus Christ becoming poor and finally, when on the cross, not only rejected by His friends and by the crowd, but even excluded by His Father. Yet He gives Himself. You say, "Ah, yes, that's an example. Is that where we're supposed to get the power—the example of Christ?" No. If Christ came only as an example of the reversal of the world's values, I don't think He'd be of any power to you at all. He would just be a burden. He would make you feel terrible. You would say, "Oh, my goodness, I'm supposed to be willing to be generous and to do all these things. I can never live like Jesus!" He wouldn't be a power at all if He was just an example. The gospel is not that we look at Jesus reversing His fortunes with people. We don't see Him becoming weak to make people strong. We don't see Him becoming poor to make people rich. You have to see that everything He did was

to reverse fortunes with you.

Why can He say, "Though you are weeping now, you will rejoice"? Because He took the weeping you deserve, the cosmic weeping. He died in the dark. Why can He say, "You will be comforted"? Because He was utterly disconsolate. He was thrown away. Why can He say, "You will be satisfied"? Because He was utterly dissatisfied on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Why can He say these things? Why can He say, "You can know that you have a great standing in heaven"? The fact is, you can live in reversal of values because you live by *His* reversal. He took your place. He put you where He deserves to be—before the throne of God, accepted, beloved. He put Himself where you deserve to be—cast out. Because of that, you get the power. That's the reason Jesus Christ can look at His disciples and say, "Blessed are you who are poor." Some of them weren't poor. Verses 19 and 20 say He looked at His disciples and said, "Blessed are you poor." For example, we know Matthew, the tax collector, wasn't poor. Why can He look at His disciples like that? The answer is that the only way for you to actually receive this power is to be poor in spirit. Let me give you two ways of looking at God.

One way of looking at God is this: I have nothing of value. God owes me nothing. He would be just to cut me off. But I rely completely on what Jesus Christ has done for me and ask that He accept me. The other approach goes like this: I've lived a fairly good, decent life. God owes me something. He owes me comfort. He shouldn't let bad things happen to me.

The first attitude is that of being poor in spirit, of living in the upside-down kingdom. The second one is being middle class in spirit, living in the right-side-up kingdom. If you are middle class in spirit, you see Jesus as an example but not as someone who actually substituted Himself for you. You won't have the *power* that comes from knowing that He reversed His fortunes with you. Because He reversed His fortunes with you, you can reverse your fortunes with everybody else. In other words, a Christian who knows where his standing in heaven is lives recklessly. For example, he lives recklessly with his money. If you really are living in this upside-down kingdom, you will be so generous that you put yourself at somewhat of a financial risk. You will be generous not only with your money, but also with your heart. Sometimes people will exploit you emotionally. You're going to be so involved in trying to help people work out their differences that sometimes people will get mad at you. Christians don't care because they can say, "It's nice to have money, privacy, and comfort; but I'm going to live like Jesus because of who I am before Him. I'm not controlled by these

things, so I'm able to move out and live in a way that the world will consider reckless because I'm poor in spirit, not middle class in spirit."

People who live in the old kingdom look at troubles and difficulties and say, "My life is meaningless." But Christians know that when they're poor, weeping, and empty, the kingdom of God is near. This is another way in which the upside-down kingdom says, "Strength is weakness, and weakness is strength." Let's admit it. When have you really come to know yourself? When have you really come to meet Christ? When have you really come to get connected with God? It's not when you're rich, happy, laughing, or included. It's the opposite. Therefore, Christians are willing to go out and sacrifice themselves. When I use the word "reckless," I don't mean irresponsible. I mean reckless as far as the world would understand. The world would say, "Anybody who gives that kind of money away should be saving up for a rainy day. They need to make sure." Of course people are going to exploit you occasionally. But a Christian will have such strength in Christ that by the world's standards he will look reckless. He's not afraid of weeping, emptiness, and sacrifice. Instead, he knows that the kingdom of God makes progress in his life and in the lives of other people when these things happen.

The pattern of the upside-down kingdom is a total reversal of your attitude toward the things the world thinks are so important—power, comfort, success, and recognition. Second, the power of the upside-down kingdom consists in knowing that Christ reversed places with you. Last, and very important, why does Jesus Christ say in Luke 6:20 "Blessed are the poor," whereas in Matthew 5 He says, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*?" People have continually gone back and forth saying, "I really don't know which it is." Is Jesus Christ saying our gospel is just for the poor in spirit? You don't have to be literally just poor in spirit. Or is the gospel really for the literally poor? The answer is there's a deliberate duality or ambiguity. The gospel will grab middle-class people. The gospel will take Christians and turn their hearts toward the poor. Whereas, the gospel will also take the poor and turn their hearts toward the rest of Christians. The poor know that salvation has to be by grace. You never find the poor having a very nice ethical religion. The poor tend to say, "I believe in the blood of Jesus. I believe in salvation by grace." Why? Because they don't have the illusion of being in control of their lives, that the reason you're on top of things is because you worked so hard. The poor know that everything is a matter of grace; therefore, the poor are more open to the gospel. But the gospel will take a middle-class person and say, "You are saved by grace alone," and will turn their heart toward the poor.

So one of the things you see in the Sermon on the Mount is, if you really understand the gospel, those with whom you associate will be the test. Do you hang out only with people of your caliber? Do you hang out only with people who have achieved what you have achieved? Or do you recognize that you are what you are by the grace of God alone? Who your friends are and who you hang out with are a significant part of the lifestyle of a Christian.

Here's where we are. The handwriting is on the wall for the old kingdom. You have to ask yourself some

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very simple questions. "Am I living a life in which I'm controlled by what the world says or am I living a life like Christ?" You can only live like Christ if you say He has come into your place and taken your place for you so you can stand in His place. I don't want you to be like Belshazzar. I'd much rather you be like Nebuchadnezzar because Nebuchadnezzar was the king before Belshazzar in the book of Daniel, and God showed up in a dream and said, "I'm going to cut you down. You're like a big tree, but I'm going to cut you down. But you're going to grow back." You need to realize that all success is unmerited grace. Nebuchadnezzar was smitten down, and he fell into mental illness; but when he woke up, unlike Belshazzar, he realized that he had been living his life according to the old ways of the kingdom. He got up and said, "Everything is a gift of grace." He changed the way in which he did everything. Don't be like Belshazzar. Be like Nebuchadnezzar. Live in the upside-down kingdom, not in the right-side-up kingdom.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask that you give us an ability to apply this. In some of our cases, it means being much more generous than we've been. In some of our cases, it means rethinking who we spend time with. It's a sweeping and comprehensive theme. We pray, Lord, as the weeks go on, that we can see what it actually means in every area of our lives. We pray that you would help us today to be humbled, not like Belshazzar, who simply continued to party harder, but like Nebuchadnezzar, who raised his eyes to heaven. We ask that you would make us people who live according to the upside-down kingdom. Show us what that means by your Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.
