

1/28/24

Sermon: Upside Down Thinking

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, CTW Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Hymns: 460, 234, 225

Theme: The wisdom of God as taught to us by Jesus calls us to citizenship in a different Kingdom, a Kingdom where things are upside-down, where the last are first, where foolishness is wisdom, where the poor are rich, the dead alive.

I. Introduction: The Upside-down Kingdom

Years ago we visited Disney World, and outside of the "Honey I Shrunk the Kids" pavilion was a waterfall. It took a moment for us to understand what was going on there.

When you look closely at the waterfall and think for a moment – you see that the waterfall is upside down...instead of the water falling and splashing at the bottom, it goes up and splashes at the top! That is actually what it is known as – "The Upside-Down Waterfall."

A. Today we take a look at Jesus as the Sage or Wisdom Teacher. I want to contrast the wisdom of Jesus with the wisdom of our world, the values Jesus taught and the values our world teaches. And we will see that the Kingdom of Jesus is truly a Kingdom Upside-Down.

II. Jesus as a "Sage"...What's that?

A. What is a "Sage"? Quite simply, a Sage is a very wise person, one to whom others go for guidance and direction. Often they were teachers, sometimes simply people whom others would go to for advice and counsel when facing difficult decisions.

Books such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and even Song of Songs are known to us as "Wisdom Literature," and are typical examples of the kind of teaching that would come from a Sage.

Picture Jesus as a sage in your life. It is not as familiar or maybe as obvious as Jesus as Prophet and Priest and Suffering Servant or Suffering King, the portraits we would normally look at, but it is an important picture.

I particularly want to spend time on this portrait because the Wisdom of Jesus is so radically different from the wisdom of our world.

Probably the one place where we see this most clearly is in the Beatitudes, **Matt. 5:1-12**. These are exactly the kind of statements we would expect from a Sage: short words of wisdom – easy to remember and to the point. But as we reflect on the content of them, we see how radical these words of wisdom really are.

Each starts with the word “Blessed.” Some translations use the word “happy,” but the idea is far more than the feeling we associate with “happy.”

Probably the best way for me to describe it is to do it from God’s perspective, for us to understand the word in the context of “favored (or gifted) by God;” and to understand here then that Jesus is referring to our ultimate well-being, to a state of spiritual joy because God’s favor is upon us.

It doesn’t mean “lucky,” or “fortunate,” or “given the ideal now.” Each of these beatitudes look longer term and point out what the end result is.

B. Have you Heard of the “Modern Beatitudes?”

In today’s culture, those who are proud get promoted, the violent get their way, those who are unscrupulous and devious and who don’t care about the cost often end up with the most prosperity, they often get the promotions. Those are many of the things, if modern entertainment is any indication, which our society values and holds in high esteem.

J. B. Phillips wrote a similar critique, called: “The People’s Beatitudes: Happy are the pushers for they get on in the world.

Happy are the hard-boiled for they never let life hurt them. Happy are they who complain, for they get their own way in the end. Happy are the blasé' for they never worry over their sins. Happy are the slave drivers for they get results. Happy are the knowledgeable men of the world for they know their way around. Happy are the troublemakers for they make people take notice of them."

Now contrast that with Jesus' list.

C. Blessed are the poor in spirit (Luke says simply "the poor"): these are those people who recognize their dependence on God, who recognize that all they have and all that they are is a gracious gift of God.

This is the opposite of the person who feels they "have it all together," that has life under control and can manage everything on their own, with no need of God. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs not to them, but to the poor. **That is upside-down.**

D. Jesus next says Blessed are those who mourn. What does Jesus mean here? How can those who are in mourning be considered "blessed?" Isn't the opposite true – shouldn't we consider those who mourn as people to be pitied? Jesus claims that they will be comforted, and again I believe He is looking long-term, and reminding us that we will find comfort in God's kingdom.

The other thing that I think is going on here is this: in our culture, we are not encouraged to mourn. We might be permitted, for a little while, but not much time passes and people start to say/think, "It's time for you to move on. Get over it. Stop mourning and get on with it."

And there may be a time when we stop mourning and start pitying ourselves, and then need to be told this. Jesus's wisdom here turns ours on its head – He claims that it is blessed to mourn, for those who mourn will be comforted. That is upside-down.

E. How about Blessed are the meek? The meek are those who are not pushing themselves to the front of the line, those content to let others jostle for position while they stand a little bit on the outside. These are not the go-getters, the take-chargers, the self-promoters.

It is not that they are not able, or have no power, but rather that they willingly put others' needs ahead of their own. Compared to our society, that is upside-down. Jesus' wisdom says that **they** shall inherit the earth.

F. Next Jesus says Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are those with a God's Kingdom perspective, who are focused on pursuing righteousness. The cares of this world are not their primary concern, the cares of God's Kingdom are. Again, compared to our indulgent society, that is upside-down.

G. Jesus says Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are those who reach out to others in need, again placing others ahead of themselves. That is upside-down. Some of our cultural sayings include "every man for himself;" "take no prisoners;" "second place is the first loser;" and I've actually seen t-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "No Mercy."

H. Blessed are the pure in heart. Our culture doesn't value purity of heart, in fact it questions whether such a thing exists. I remember an episode of the sit-com "Friends." One of the characters makes the statement "there is no such thing as a truly good deed. There is always some selfish motivation behind every good deed." The show then spends the rest of the time trying to prove this statement false. The message comes through loud and clear – there is no purity of heart in the modern world.

Jesus' wisdom, however, promises that the **pure in heart will see God.**

I. Jesus says Blessed are the peacemakers. Compared to our culture, that is upside-down. I don't know much about hockey, but I do know that the guy with the reputation for

stopping fights isn't going to be nearly as noticed as the guy who is willing to drop the gloves and go at it.

J. The final beatitude states Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Who of us has ever looked at someone being persecuted and had our first thought be "wow are they ever blessed!" Our response usually is "wow am I ever blessed that it is not me in their situation!"

Jesus turns this upside-down and promises the very kingdom of heaven to those who endure hardship and persecution because they are righteous.

Take a hard look at that question this morning. Look at your life – how you spend your time, what you seek after, what things bother you, where your priorities are. Now I'm not going to ask you to share this with the rest of us, so you don't need to sit there trying to think of the "right" answer. What wisdom does your life run by?

III. There is a lot of wisdom to think about in today's lesson in 1 Corinthians. There is a lot of God's Upside-down Kingdom, with God making the wisdom of this world into foolishness.

A. In the face of all the wisdom of the world, Paul simply says, "we preach Christ and him crucified." That doesn't make sense! Where is the wisdom in a horrific death, the death of a common criminal? Where is the wisdom in the One Son of God dying on a cross? And for us, where is the wisdom in following this message, or spreading this message?

The answer is in vs. 25. If I could paraphrase that verse, the answer is to follow God's ways instead of man's, to rely on God's strength and not our own. Even when it doesn't make sense, like "Blessed are those who mourn," or like answering the demand for miracles and/or wisdom with a simple story about Christ crucified: even then, to focus on God. Even then to obey. Even then, to live by the wisdom of Jesus and not the wisdom of our world.

B. Our society says “better start saving now for retirement so that you can live out your final years in luxury.” Jesus says “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” **(Matt. 6:19-21).**

C. Our society says, “look out for number one.” Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” **(Matt. 16:24).**

D. Our society says, “strive to be rich and powerful so that others will serve your needs.” Jesus says, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” **(Mark 10:45).**

E. Our society says “go to college, become a wise scholar.” Paul tells us that “God (has) made foolish the wisdom of this world.” **I challenge any of you to visit any mainstream college and see the kinds of things they are teaching. If you find Jesus being mentioned at all, it will not be in a good sense.**

IV. Conclusion: Following Jesus simply does not make sense if we judge it by the wisdom of our world.

A. In reality it does not always work out well here on earth. In the Beatitudes we looked at earlier, most of the rewards were not in this worldly kingdom, but the next.

Jesus the Sage calls us to citizenship in a different Kingdom.

That’s Paul’s message for us today, in a real practical, but hard to swallow kind of sense!

B. Jesus’ sage wisdom is radical, counter-cultural and opposite to the wisdom of today’s world. That is just as God

intended it should be. The people of God are called out to be aliens in this world...to be lined up with Him is to be against the logic of the world.

So, the question remains...Whose wisdom shapes the pursuits of **your** lives...the wisdom of God brought to us by His Son and reinforced in all of us by the Holy Spirit, or that of the kingdom of this world?

In Acts Chapter 9: 4 and 5, to stop Paul's persecution of Christians, Jesus says that he should not "kick against the Goads." That means that we have to rebel against the natural conviction of our worldliness and go in the direction of Christ...to follow Him even though it may make no worldly sense.

We must all Ponder these questions and come up with an answer for ourselves and **then resolve to stop resisting and follow in the way of the Lord at all costs!** Amen? Let us Pray...