

This Is Jesus: The Upside-Down Kingdom

Where the World Is Flat

March 3, 2018

Worship Song – “Great God Who Saves”

Video – Behind the Scenes

Feature – “Crazy Enough”

Good morning everyone. Thanks for making the effort to be here even though you lost an hour of sleep last night. Let’s pray together before we get into this.

Father in Heaven, thank you so much for the opportunity to come together this morning.

We praise You for being the great God who *saves* through what Jesus did for us on the cross, but we also praise you for being the great God who *serves* through Him as well.

Help us this morning to comprehend just how amazing that is.

And then may your Holy Spirit encourage and empower us to go and do likewise.

If you've been here at all over the past several months you know that we have been talking at great length about the way of life that Jesus came to teach and to model for us. He called it "The Kingdom of God."

And by that term He meant not some "faraway magical place we get to go when we die if we believe in Him" ... but an alternate reality that exists right smack in the middle of (and in spite of) whatever political, economic and religious systems surround us.

The Kingdom of God is the experience of life where Jesus – not Caesar or the President or the CEO – is in charge. Its vision and its values (as we've seen in this series) are upside-down in

comparison to those that the socially-ordering systems of our world are constantly pushing on us.

Quite frankly, the things that Jesus tells us that citizens of the Kingdom *believe* and *do* – the things He says that will bring happiness not only to us *personally* but will also produce wholeness and full-human-flourishing *throughout the entire world* seem to be crazy.

- Instead a list of religious rules that tell us what to do or not do (and also allow us to condemn those who fail to keep them), Jesus says there's just one: *love others like God loves us*.
- Instead of hating those who hurt you or treat you poorly, Jesus says pray for them and attempt to do “good” to them.
- Instead of a never-ending climb up the economic ladder – pursuing a life of

conspicuous consumption, Jesus says to move down the ladder through radical generosity – releasing your financial resources to the people and causes God loves.

- Instead of showing off how smart you are and how self-sufficient and tough you are, Jesus says to become like little children who freely admit their weaknesses and dependency; who are always learning and growing and filled with wonder.

It's crazy talk.

And it's going to get even crazier over the next three weeks as we turn our attention to some of the events leading up to His crucifixion.

Redefining Relationships

Now, to this point, we've talked a lot about how

Jesus reacted to the values of religious, political and economic systems of His day.

- When it came to religion, the system said that those who kept the rules best were at the top; but Jesus constantly hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes and other notorious sinners (to say nothing of Samaritans and Gentiles!) while still offering the law-keeping Pharisees the opportunity to join Him.
- When it came to wealth, the system said that those who had the most were the ones deserving of honor and respect, but Jesus never discriminated between the poor and the rich. He treated them the same.
- When it came to power, the prevailing expectation of his countrymen was that God would send a Messiah to overthrow the Romans and put the Jewish nation on top. But Jesus paid taxes and treated Roman

soldiers with respect and compassion while, at the same time, denying that ultimate authority rested with Caesar.

As I've said several times in this series, Jesus didn't seem to be all that interested in what the system was doing. He neither attempted to control it nor endorse it nor change it.

Instead, He lived as if there was a higher system – because there was.

Furthermore, in the three and a half years of His ministry Jesus spends time with (and is equally comfortable with):

- Religious law-keepers ... and religious law-breakers
- Men ... and women
- Rich ... and poor
- The able-bodied ... and the sick
- Jews ... and Samaritans ... and Gentiles

- Roman sympathizers ... and revolutionary zealots
- Roman soldiers ... and Jewish freedom-fighters

And many from these various – and often opposing – groupings actually become His followers.

And the message is clear: in God’s Kingdom the barriers, boundaries and “pecking order” defined by the religious, political and economic systems of this world do not exist.

... a truth and a reality that is going to be vividly illustrated by Jesus himself in a most unexpected and, even, scandalous way.

Redefining the Passover

So let’s set the scene.

The annual celebration of Passover is only days away. (Passover, for those who are not aware, is

the remembrance of how God miraculously delivered the people of Israel from centuries of slavery in Egypt. On the night of their escape, each family killed a lamb and sprinkled its blood on their doorposts so that the angel of death would “pass over” that house).

Jesus has informed His disciples that they are going to Jerusalem for the occasion but, for them, it will *not* be a time of celebration. Instead, He tells them, the Jewish and Roman authorities will conspire together ... and He will be crucified.

The disciples are totally confused by this; so much so that Peter insists that he and the others will never allow such a thing to happen to Jesus. After all (in their thinking) how can the Messiah of God be killed?

So, as Jesus comes over the hill into Jerusalem, riding on the back of a colt (which is an image straight out of the Messianic prophecy of Zechariah) ...

... and as He is greeted by a multitude shouting “Hosanna, to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (which is also a prophetic allusion to the advent of the Messiah) ...

... and as this multitude proceeds into the city and the whole town begins to ask “who is this?” and the crowd leading Jesus and surrounding Jesus answers, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” ...

... the disciples breathe a collective sigh of relief.

“Maybe Jesus was just having a bad day back there,” they think, “because, with all this support, it sure doesn’t *seem* like anything bad is going to happen.”

In their minds, the enemy will be destroyed, Jesus will become King and the Kingdom will be restored to Israel.

For the next five days, Jesus and his disciples are in and around Jerusalem; in and out of the Temple. Sharp words are exchanged with the religious leaders and tension is clearly rising but Jesus appears to be winning. Each day, large crowds gather and express their delight as He publicly calls out their hypocrisy.

So, as the sun sets on the first night of Passover and Jesus and His disciples gather in a special room that has been reserved for the meal, the disciples are confident.

“Everything is going according to plan,” they believe. “Very soon Jesus – and, by association, they themselves – will assume power.”

Now, two things are going to happen in this room.

One of them, Christians have remembered and reenacted for over 2,000 years. And we’re going to do that again in just a few minutes.

But the other thing that happens ... well, that one doesn't get nearly the same amount of attention because, quite frankly, it's Jesus being crazy again. Not only is it totally upside-down thinking, it's a little bit weird and maybe even offensive.

We'll get to that but let's start at the beginning.

Luke writes that ...

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

Luke 22:14-16 (NIV)

... a statement which, again, would have bewildered the disciples because, in their minds, Jesus was going to *win* not *die*.

So the meal begins.

Luke (as well as Matthew and Mark) tells us that, at some point ...

He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Luke 22:19-20 (NIV)

Now what Jesus is doing here is in itself quite radical. He is redefining for them the meaning of the Passover.

In essence, He is telling them that *He* is about to become the ultimate Passover lamb – that *His* body and not the body of an animal would be broken so they could be freed not from the evil of *Rome* but from the evil of *sin* which had ruined not

just their nation but the entire cosmos.

And He was telling them that the old way of relating to God was about to be replaced by a new way – a new covenant – made possible by His blood.

And this is why Christians focus so much on this first part of what happened in that room. It's a defining moment of our faith.

Communion

So, we're going to stop right here and do what Jesus asked his first disciples to do: to remember what He did for us through his body and blood by eating the bread and drinking the fruit of the vine.

To help with that, Nathan and Hannah are going to come onstage to provide some music and those who are assisting with communion are going to get into position at their station. <WAIT>

Now, in just a minute we're going to distribute the bread. And while that's happening, the words to the song will be on the screen. Feel free to sing along.

And when the bread gets to you, take a piece and hold on to it until everyone has gotten theirs. Then I'll say a prayer and then we'll all eat it together. OK?

Here we go. Let's distribute the bread.

Worship Song – “Behold the Lamb”

Would you pray with me?

Like the children of Israel, what we *really* need to be delivered from is not a bad job situation or a health issue or the oppression of an enemy. What we really need to be delivered from is our *sin* – whatever that looks like for us.

And Jesus, in the death of your body on the cross, you have become our Passover lamb. You have done that for us.

And we are grateful.

Amen.

Now, we're going to drink the fruit of the vine together as a way to remember that Jesus' blood brings about the new covenant. There's much that could be said about that but what it means – bottom line – is that Jesus is upholding both ends of the deal.

See, under the old covenant, God promised Israel that He would bless them – that's His side of the deal – if they obeyed loved and obeyed Him – that was their side of the deal.

But they didn't. And neither do we. Not a single one of us has obeyed. We are all covenant

breakers.

But by living the perfect life that none of us have lived, Jesus fulfilled our side of the covenant. And this is the new deal – that He becomes our representative and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

However, to stand in our place also requires that He take the punishment that we deserve for sin, which is death. And so this new covenant requires his life – his blood.

Let's distribute the cup.

Worship Song – “Behold the Lamb”

Would you pray with me?

Now, I'm going to ask you to do two things before we move on to *the other thing* that happened in that room on that night so long ago.

1. First, would you please put your cup in the little holder on the seat back in front of you?
2. Second, would you stand together with me to sing the final verse of that communion hymn?

Worship Song – “Behold the Lamb” verse 4
<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

Thanks, you may be seated.

The Rest of the Story

Now, it’s very easy to stop at this point in the story because, for one thing, when you read both Matthew and Mark’s version of it, this is exactly where they end it.

Both of them write that Jesus and the disciples all sang a hymn together (like we just did), then they went out to the Mount of Olives where, in a few short hours, Jesus would be arrested and taken

into custody just as He had predicted.

Now, *John's* Gospel does tell us more about what happens and *Luke's* Gospel does, too ... but ... we tend to move past what they wrote because, as I've said repeatedly in this series, Christians focus so much on what Jesus did for us on the cross that we overlook what He did in the rest of his life ... as if that wasn't as important.

By the way, when I say that I don't mean to be overly critical because *grace* – forgiveness that we don't earn but that we receive by faith for every sin we've ever committed or will commit – is a pretty big deal. It affects our eternity!

But what Jesus has in mind for this world – His mission – is far bigger than any of us as individuals.

- Jesus has a plan to redeem *the whole planet* beginning in the here and now!

- Jesus has a plan to restore this place to God's *original intentions* beginning in the here and now!
- Jesus has an agenda for the here and now that can change *everything* – all of the tension, the strife, the violence, the poverty, the tragedy that is a direct result of the barriers and boundaries and pecking order defined by the powers of this world.

But we have to know the plan and follow it even if it seems crazy ... which, at long last, brings us to the rest of the story – which, I have already warned you is going to sound crazy. It did to the disciples who experienced it!

Now, to understand what happens, we have to put what Luke says with what John says because each records only that part of the action which seemed important to his purpose in writing.

Luke writes ... and before we read this, remember

that the disciples are convinced that Jesus is winning (as they defined it). He's not going to *die*. He's going to become King! And all of *them* are going to get cabinet positions. They're going to the top with Him!

All that talk about His body and His blood and a new covenant? They were like “this bread is your body? This wine is your blood? Ok, Jesus, if you say so.”

And we know that's true because even after this incredible moment where Jesus redefines Passover in terms of what He knows is about to happen ...

Luke writes that ...

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Luke 22:24 (NIV)

Incredible! Jesus is telling them He is going to die for their sins and the sins of the whole world and

giving them a way to remember that for at least the next 20 centuries!

And they're arguing ...

- Over who is going to be chief of staff
- Over who is going to sit at His right hand
- Over who is going to be in charge
- Over who is going to get to call the shots.

They still don't get what Jesus is all about.

(By the way, this is one of the reasons we can trust what we're reading in the Gospel writings. There is no sugarcoating of the guys who turn out to be the leaders. If these guys had invented the whole thing, they would have hidden this kind of stuff. They would have "gotten it" on the first try).

Anyway ... instead of going back over the lesson of the Passover, Jesus jumps into their discussion because He knows that He is going to die, then be resurrected and then return to the Father, leaving

them to carry on His mission.

And he sees that their understanding of authority is not a Kingdom understanding. It's a worldly understanding defined by barriers, boundaries and, especially, pecking order.

So he says to them ...

“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that.” Luke 22:25 (NIV)

“Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.” Luke 22:26 (NIV)

See what Jesus is doing? He's flipping everything upside down.

“Having authority and being in the position of

benefactor doesn't give you the right to lord it over people," Jesus is saying. "Just the opposite. Citizens of God's Kingdom who are at the top (as the world defines 'top') use their power and power to benefit others not themselves. They serve like someone who is at the bottom (as the world defines "bottom")."

Then Jesus asks a question that sets up a really crazy thing He is going to do.

He says ...

"Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves?" Luke 22:27 (NIV)

Now, think about that. Who is greater? The one sitting at the table or the one serving the table?

It's not a trick question. It's the one sitting at the table.

Which is what Jesus says:

“Is it not the one who is at the table?”

And then He adds:

“But I am among you as one who serves.” Luke 22:27 (NIV)

Now, these guys had heard Jesus talk about being a servant before. They had seen him break through the barriers and boundaries of His culture. They had watched him deal with people *equally* regardless of where they were in the world’s pecking order.

But they had never seen anything like what He was about to do.

The Apostle John writes that ...

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things

under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God. John 13:2-3 (NIV)

John is basically condensing everything that Matthew, Mark and Luke had written but I just love that expression of Jesus' self-confidence. Jesus knew who He was and what He was doing so He had nothing to prove ... which is why He could do the crazy thing he was about to do.

John writes:

He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:4-5 (NIV)

Now, if you've been around church for any length of time, I'm sure you've heard this story before. However, for reasons I've already mentioned, you probably haven't connected it with what happens

on the night Jesus is betrayed and arrested.

But this is huge. This is literally the final lesson that Jesus teaches his crew before His death.

And because of that, I think this moment is just as significant to Jesus as His redefining Passover for them; just as significant as his blood providing a new covenant with God. I think this is right up there.

Of course, because you and I don't live in first century Palestine, we may not get what's going on here because we don't ever wash one another's feet. I mean, how would you feel if someone came up to you right now with a basin of water and a towel and said, "Hey, take your shoes off, I want to wash your feet?"

You'd probably be like "whoa, I am not sure about that" because it feels like a very personal act. It's a little too invasive, especially if your feet stink or you have some other kind of foot problem –

ingrown toenails or a fungus or just plain old ugly feet.

I was once at a conference (right here in this auditorium) where the focus was on this particular passage and this particular event. At one point, we were all invited to take a basin of water and a towel but instead of washing one another's feet, we were invited to wash one another's hands.

Why? Because it's just too weird and too personal in our culture to get down to the foot level with someone you don't know. It's kind of crazy.

But that isn't what was crazy about Jesus washing the feet of His disciples.

In their world, because the roads were dusty and dirty and everyone wore sandals, whenever you came into someone's home, you would wash your feet. The host would offer you a basin of water and you would take off your sandals, wash your feet,

and then dry them with a towel.

However, if you entered the home of a rich person who had servants, *it was likely that they would do it for you*. In fact, this was the mark of a person's high status in society: that your servants washed the feet of your guests.ⁱ

On the flip side, *to be that servant* who had to do the washing of feet was about as low as one could get. In fact, rabbinic teaching stipulated that masters could not require their Jewish slaves to wash other people's feet, although a *Gentile* slave could be required to do so.ⁱⁱ

So, foot washing was a common experience ... BUT ... under no circumstances would a host *ever* wash the feet of his guests. It simply was not done ... which is why what Jesus was doing in this moment was crazy.

He wasn't just the host of the meal. In the minds of the disciples, He was the King-in-waiting. There

was no higher authority. And here He was, down on His hands and knees with a basin and a towel, doing the most menial and humiliating work a person could do in that culture.

It would have been as shocking to them as – I don't know – redefining the meaning of Passover.

In fact, it was so mind-blowing that John says when Jesus got to where Peter was sitting, Peter argued with Him. “Master, you will *not* do such a thing!”

But Jesus insisted and Peter relented.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, it's interesting to note that the meal is already in progress when Jesus begins washing the disciples' feet ... which means that, for whatever reason, the basin and the towel had been neglected when the disciples had entered.^{iv}

So, you have to wonder ...

- Why hadn't they washed their own feet?
- Why hadn't they washed each other's feet?
- More importantly, since they believed Jesus was going to be King, why hadn't someone washed His feet?

The answer is simple. *They thought too highly of themselves.*

Remember that Luke tells us that there was a big argument as to which of them was going to be the greatest when Jesus became King. It was all about the pecking order. And no one wanted to be at the bottom.

All of them were thinking “if there's going to be any foot washing going on here tonight, it's going to be someone else's job because, after all, I'm up there with Jesus.”

But in a stunning rebuke of their pride and their ambition, Jesus does it for all of them – in spite of their pride and ambition, in spite of the fact that

He knows they will all desert Him in a few hours. He even does it for Judas who He knows has already betrayed Him to the authorities!

What It Means

John writes that ...

When [Jesus] had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

*“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.
John 13:12 (NIV)*

John doesn't say this but I can imagine the shocked disciples thinking, “Uhhh, we really don't because this is crazy. You'd better explain it to us.”

And Jesus does.

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

John 13:13-15 (NIV)

By the way, it's amazing how often that idea appears in Christianity. We are never asked by God to do something for Him and others that He hasn't already done for us.

To put it another way, we are called to give only what we've already received.

But that's not the main point here.

The main point is that in God's Kingdom the world is flat. Here there is no hierarchy of power. Here there is no "pecking order." For here in God's Kingdom, even the King is a lowly servant.

I like how Scott Waalkes puts it in his book, *The Fullness of Time in a Flat World*. He writes:

“Following the lead of its king, Christianity, as a political culture, operates on a politics characterized by love of one’s enemies, forgiveness of sins and, among other things, the humbling act of washing one another's feet.

“Not only does Jesus humiliate himself,” he continues, “invading a personal space that our own culture resists violating, but He also washes the feet of Judas, the enemy who is about to betray him and the disciples who will soon abandon him.

He concludes:

“Jesus is calling all disciples to a life of service in a community without hierarchy; a life of downward mobility and service to each other that brings glory to the ones who serve, suffer and give their lives for others in imitation of their king.”^v

... who Himself serves and suffers and gives His life for others.

I find it interesting that in our world and in our culture we go to great lengths to honor those who have “served our country” and rightfully so. However, I think that emphasis sometimes gives the impression that the only way to be a servant is to join the military or go into law enforcement.

But Jesus says “not so.” For if you belong to Him, you are the servant of *everyone*. That’s your calling regardless of your power or position or prestige.

Now, what does that look like in real life?

I don’t know. There aren’t any hard and fast rules about it because, in the Kingdom of God, it’s about relationships not rules.

The Apostle Paul explains it like this:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or

vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Philippians 2:3-8 (NIV)

In your relationships, Paul says, have the same mindset that Jesus did and let that guide your actions. That might lead you to do some pretty simple things like being nice to people just because they *are* people.

Or it might lead you to do crazy things (at least as the world defines crazy) like loving your enemies or the cultural equivalent of washing their feet.

Now, having said all of this, I need to also add that for me personally, this concept is extremely challenging because by personality I do not have a servant heart. Maybe some of you are the same way. Too many times, I neglect to see myself as a citizen of the Kingdom here to serve in whatever way Jesus needs me to.

So, as I was preparing for this message, I felt like it would be helpful for me to put into words what I would like to be true of me. I'm going to make a little sign and post it where I can be reminded on a regular basis.

Above all else I am a servant.

I don't need to be first, right, liked,

respected or comfortable.

Regardless of the position, power or prestige I have, there is no task which makes life better for someone else that is beneath me.

I am here first and foremost to offer a taste of God's goodness and grace to others (especially the lost, the lonely and the least) by putting their needs and desires ahead of my own.

If you struggle with this like I do, maybe you ought to develop a statement like that, too.

More importantly, I just have to wonder: what would it be like if everyone in our world thought "crazy" like this?

That might be too much to ask. But, at the very least, I have to wonder *what would happen if we Christians - "saints" the New Testament calls us - were known for our humility and servant-heartedness?*

What if that was the sound that reverberated through our world because of us?

We're going to close by singing a song together that expresses that idea. So stand with me and let's sing together.

Worship Song – “Sound of the Saints”

Endnotes

ⁱ From Ray Pritchard, “Dirty Feet,” <https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/dirty-feet/>

ⁱⁱ From <https://www.nbseminary.ca/washing-the-feet>

ⁱⁱⁱ John 13:6-9

^{iv} Pritchard

^v The Fullness of Time in a Flat World, Scott Waalkes pg 192