

**This Is Jesus: The Upside-Down Kingdom**

***Reckless Love***

**February 18, 2018**

**PRE-SERVICE VIDEO**

**Worship Songs – Rejoice / Climb / T&G**

**Video – Behind the Scenes**

**Feature – “Jesus is Just Alright” / Offering**

Jesus is just alright ... Jesus is just so cool ...  
Jesus is just the greatest ... unless, of course,  
He's not. And in the first century Jewish  
world in which He carried out His mission,  
there were quite a few people for whom  
Jesus was *definitely NOT* “alright.”

That's because Jesus, as we've seen over the  
past several months, came to declare and  
inaugurate a new way of living – He called it  
“The Kingdom of God” or “The Kingdom of

Heaven” ... Jesus came to launch a new way of living that seems to be upside-down when compared to the common wisdom of “how the world works.”

And when you’re bought into and maybe even leading one (or more) of the three socially-organizing institutions that *tell* everyone how things ought to work ... and someone comes along who says “you’ve got it completely backwards” ... and people start listening to and following that person instead of adhering to the status quo ... that person is *not alright* with you (no matter how catchy the song sounds).

As we’ve talked about in recent weeks, Jesus openly rejected the way of “winning” (or happiness or meaning) as defined by ...

- The *religious institutions* of our world ... which tell us “here’s what you need to do to connect with and/or appease God (or whatever Supreme Eternal Being or Force there is).”
- He challenged the way of our *economic institutions* ... which tell us “here’s what you need to *have* in order to experience the good life.”
- And our *political institutions* ... which tell us “here’s the kind of *power* that will ensure a fair share for you and your tribe.”

Now, just to be clear, when I say that Jesus rejected the way of the institutions I don’t mean that He rejected *the institutions themselves*. After all ...

- Jesus didn't endorse overthrowing the Romans or tell the Roman soldiers who followed Him to desert or organize a coup.
- And Jesus didn't tell his fellow Jews to walk away from Judaism
- And He didn't tell every rich person He met to give everything away (though he did tell one in order to illustrate that he wasn't as perfect as he thought).

Instead, Jesus pretty much *ignored* the institutions as they existed in His day. He wasn't interested in either endorsing or changing them. He seemed to realize that human institutions were going to come and go, and to have their good points and bad

points, and that, really, in the end, none of it mattered because *His unseen Kingdom existed right in the middle of it all and even in spite of it all.*

And that meant that people then (and now) could be “in the world” without being “of the world” and thereby have a transformative impact “on the world.”

Sadly, the desperate need for that kind of transformation has once again obvious. Once again, we grieve with the victims of yet another demented and broken person acting out the evil that has taken hold of them. There has to be a better way. And there is. It’s the way of Jesus.

And what we’re doing each Sunday from now through Palm Sunday is comparing His

way with the way of the world.

## A “Religion” Review

Last week, we started out with religion and we saw that by the time Jesus came onto the scene, the religious institution of His day had gone far beyond the Ten Commandments by adding 700 small-print pages of rules that defined, in almost every situation, what it meant to be a godly Jewish man or woman.

Many of those rules gave very specific instructions about ...

- How a person could remain holy and clean before God.
- And how they could avoid contamination staying away from

things or people that were unholy or unclean

- And what to do if that contamination somehow happened.

Now, as we learned last week, the purpose behind the additional rules was actually commendable. The religious leaders who developed them weren't trying to complicate things. Instead, they were making an earnest attempt to bring God and faith into the reality of everyday life.

And that made sense because, in the Jewish experience, God was not some distant and detached observer who one day would show up to judge everyone. YHWH was vitally concerned with what happened in His creation and wanted to have a say in it, which is why He gave Israel the Ten

Commandments in the first place.

However, over time, the religious institution of Judaism did what religious institutions always do: *it became a convoluted and confused mess*. Instead of serving people by bringing them closer to God, the man-made rules became the master – a burdensome checklist of dos and don'ts – that only the most detailed and devout could keep up with ...

... which meant that many of the Jews of Jesus' day had simply given up! The institution was actually pushing people away from God ...

**... which is why Jesus was so often angry at its leaders.**

*“You guys crush people with*

*unbearable religious demands,”  
He said, “but you never lift a  
finger to ease the burden.”  
Matthew 23:4 (NLT)*

Of course, the religious institution was just doing what religious institutions always do. So Jesus did what He always did. He brought clarity and simplicity by turning the whole thing upside-down.

“Do you want to know what the right thing is to do in every situation?” He asked. “You don’t need 700 pages of rules to tell you. There’s only one: *Love God and love one another in the same way that I have loved you.* Ask yourself ‘what does love require of me – and then do that.’”

Now, to some that clarity and simplicity was a breath of fresh air. But to others it was

perceived as a dire threat to the status quo and to the institution ... which is why its leaders – the Scribes and the Pharisees – began to look for ways to trap Jesus, hoping to have Him arrested on charges of blasphemy or sedition.

## **Friend of “Sinners”**

Of course, one could say that Jesus made it easy for them to do so because He constantly did things that violated the purity laws – the laws of clean and unclean.

- He didn't always wash in “the right way” before eating
- He didn't always eat the “right kinds” of foods

But the most egregious and repeated

offenses had to do with the kinds of people who were around Him. For instance ...

**Luke tells us in chapter 15 of his account of Jesus' life that ...**

*Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.*

And you couldn't get much more unclean than that crew.

- Tax collectors were considered to be traitors and idolaters.
- “Notorious sinners” were the blatantly immoral prostitutes, thieves and other low-life.

However, the real offense wasn't so much that these unclean men and women were

interested in what Jesus had to say. Apparently the interest went both ways.

### **Luke writes ...**

*This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that He was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!*  
*Luke 15:1-2 (NLT)*

Now, the reason for their complaint was that a good rabbi should know better. Jesus should know that whenever a clean person came into contact with an unclean person, they themselves became unclean.

He should know that to maintain personal holiness, you stay away from those who are not only unclean in their body (leprosy, menstruating, etc) but also from those who

are unclean in their *actions* – like these tax collectors and notorious sinners!

Furthermore, as a rabbi, Jesus should know that to share a meal with someone was to say to them, “I believe that you are accepted and approved by God. I believe that He will invite you to the Great Feast of the Kingdom at the end of time.”

Therefore, to hang out with and even eat with these kinds of people was unthinkable. It was scandalous and offensive. And the leaders of the religious institution wanted to know why.

Luke tells us that instead of responding directly Jesus answered, as He often did, with a story; a parable – actually, *three* of them that are designed to flip everything

upside down.

In the first story, Jesus tells about a shepherd who has 100 sheep and loses one. So what does he do? Naturally, he leaves the 99 and goes and looks for it. And when he finds it, he invites his friends to celebrate with him.

### **And Jesus says ...**

*“In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!” Luke 15:3-7 (NLT)*

Then He tells a story about a woman who has 10 coins and loses one. So what does she do? Naturally, she tears the house apart

until she finds it. And when she does, she invites her friends to celebrate with her.

### **And Jesus says ...**

*“In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”*

*Luke 15:8-10 (NLT)*

## **The “Religious” Mindset**

Now, because you and I have the advantage of 20 centuries of Christian history and teaching, we need to push pause here for just a minute to remember the mindset of the religious leaders Jesus day as they are hearing Him say these things. Otherwise we’ll miss the fact that what He is *saying* is almost as scandalous as His *conduct*.

Two things were uppermost in the mind of the devout Jews living under Roman domination in first-century Palestine.

**1. They believed that “sinners” were the reason they were captives in their own land.**

In other words, it was because of reprobates like the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the thieves that God’s Kingdom had not been restored to Israel as the prophets had promised. It was *their* fault that the Holy Land was occupied by the unclean and unholy Romans.

Of course, if they would just do what the Pharisees did – if they did what the Law required to make themselves clean – then God’s Kingdom would come.

That's the first thought in their heads.  
Here's the second.

## **2. They understood the coming of God's Kingdom to be Judgment Day for sinners and Gentiles (or non-Jews).**

When the Messiah came, they believed, he was going to wipe out all of the enemies of Israel and of God (which were the sinners and the Gentiles).

We talked about this way back in the beginning of the previous series “Dawn of a New Day” – that it was such a shock that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah but instead of preaching vengeance or hatred for the enemies of God and Israel, He not only declares it be the day of the Lord's *favor*; He tells His followers they must love their enemies and pray for them!

It was just crazy talk ... so much so (and we saw this as well) that even John the Baptist, who was there when the Holy Spirit came down like a dove and rested on Jesus ... and who heard the voice saying “this is my son who I love” – we saw that *even he* was confused by Jesus’ approach.

So when Jesus says “there is joy in Heaven when even one sinner repents” there is a strong resistance among the scribes and Pharisees because this vision simply does not fit the paradigm. There is *supposed to be* joy in Heaven when sinners get what’s coming to them not when they repent.

But the resistance they feel to what Jesus is saying at this moment is nothing like the shock they will feel when Jesus tells His

third story.

## A Crazy Father

Jesus begins ...

*A man had two sons. One day, the younger of the two told his father, “I want my inheritance now before you die.”*

I can imagine Jesus pausing just long enough to allow His listeners to digest the full-impact of this request. In essence, the younger son is saying, “You cannot die fast enough for me. So, let’s just punch the fast-forward button on this movie and get to the part where you’re gone and I get everything that’s coming to me.”

And after letting the offense of that request

sink in for His listeners Jesus says ...

*The father agreed and he divided  
his wealth between his two sons.*

And again, I can imagine Jesus pausing slightly here and allowing His listeners to comprehend the full-impact of what He was saying.

“What? The father *agreed*? That’s not what he should do. What he should do with this dishonorable son is call the elders of the town to come and stone him! At least, he should legally disown the boy.”

But this father doesn’t. He doesn’t defend himself. He doesn’t retaliate to protect his social status. Because his love for his son is stronger than his own need for approval, He chooses to live with the embarrassment and

a shattered reputation and gives his son the freedom to do what he wants.

Jesus continues ...

*Soon this son moved to a distant land (which, by definition, would be among the unclean Gentiles), and there he blew his fortune in wild living.*

*Then a great famine hit and he began to starve. He took a job feeding pigs, and desired to eat what they were eating.*

Now, for a Jewish man to reach the point of desiring to eat what a pig was eating ... well, you couldn't get much lower than that. Because when it came to "clean" and "unclean," pigs were about as "unclean" as you could get.

Jesus continued:

*When the young man finally realized how far he had fallen - that the servants of his father had more than he did, he came up with a plan: I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."*

*[So] The young man began his journey home. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming.*

Apparently, his father had been watching and waiting for him every day.

But for what purpose?

Most likely, in the minds of those listening, it would be for the father to do what he should have done in the first place: to restore his honor by heaping shame and condemnation on this dishonorable son.

- He might say to him, “I do not know you. I have only one son. My other son is dead to me” and shut him out.
- Or maybe he would show mercy and merely punish his son to teach him a lesson; maybe a whipping in the streets.
- Or maybe the son would be required to do something to prove his sincerity; that he really had changed.

But that's not what happens.

**Instead, Jesus says ...**

*The father, filled with love and compassion, ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him!*

No shame. No judgment. No questions. Instead, it's running and kisses and embraces.

But that's only the beginning.

*Before the son could finish his rehearsed speech, his father cut him off and said to the servants, "Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening.*

*“We must celebrate with a feast,  
for this son of mine was dead and  
has now returned to life. He was  
lost, but now he is found.”*

*“And so,” Jesus said, “the party  
began.”*

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Now, again, because most of us have heard this story many times, it's easy to overlook the scandalous and maybe even unwise nature of this father's response. So let's change the scenario just a bit.<sup>i</sup>

What if the father was a friend of yours whose son's drug habit had resulted in thousands of dollars in rehab bills, draining most of his parent's retirement savings? Then, after dragging the family through years of pain and indebtedness, the son

leaves rehab early, breaks into their house, steals his mother's jewelry, and disappears for two years. No one knows where he is. He's just gone.

Then one afternoon you get a call from your buddy and he begs you to come over that night for a party. *His son just showed up in the driveway* and he wants to celebrate the boy's return. You'd be shocked wouldn't you?

And you'd certainly have a few questions!

- You would want to know what had happened.
- You would want to know if he was sorry.
- You would want to know if he was back for good.
- You would want to know if he had

really changed.

You would probably be tempted to suggest that your friend wait for a few weeks. “It feels too early for a party, don’t you think?”

You might not say it out loud but you’d probably be thinking *your friend is being reckless because of his affections for his wayward son.*

... which is exactly what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees; to the maintainers of the religious institution.

He’s saying “you guys think you’re doing God’s will by keeping your distance from sinners so you can remain clean. But your thinking is upside-down because *you do not understand the nature of God*, so let me explain

it to you:

- “The God you worship is like a crazy Jewish father who rewards his pork-eating son with steak.
- “Your God is like a mother or father who is willing to become a laughingstock to the community if it means getting their child back.
- “Your God is like an irrational parent who, instead of punishing a son who brings disgrace, elevates him to the high position of most-honored-guest.
- “Your God is like a foolish parent who asks no questions, even when they’ve been treated terribly.

**“Your God is a Heavenly Father who recklessly runs to, embraces and kisses the ‘unclean’ and ‘sinful’ for no other reason than He loves them.**

“They matter to him far more than a lost sheep does to a shepherd or a lost coin does to a householder. And that’s why I hang out with tax collectors and other notorious sinners.”

Jesus’ story is intended to *shock* the religious establishment: first, with the terrible and dishonorable behavior of a son who wishes his father dead but then, with the unmerited, unconditional, and unreasonable favor and wild acceptance he receives just for showing up.

And the point is this: as bad of a sinner as you think this son was ... as unclean and

unholy as you think these tax collectors and other notorious sinners are, the love God the Father has for them is even greater.

## **The Older Brother**

Now, again, for those of us who have heard this story many times, it's easy to think "well, of course it is. We know *that* because we sing about it almost every Sunday. We rejoice in our good, good Father. Amazing Grace how sweet the sound."

But let's be honest. There's something pretty unsettling about reckless love.

I mean, do we really want the world to work like this? More importantly, do we really want a God who is this sappy and so in love with his creatures that he would take them

back without at least requiring some kind of promise, penance or performance?

Isn't there some value in people like those institutional religionists? Sure, they went overboard in creating 700 pages of dos and don'ts but isn't that better than anarchy? Where people just do whatever they want knowing they can come home and all will be forgiven?

I mean, you can't really blame them too much for thinking Jesus was dangerous to the established order. After all, if He had His way, the "sinners" who were responsible for all the problems would become "insiders" while the "good people" who were trying to do the right thing would wind up as "outsiders" – and that just wasn't fair.

... which was exactly the response of the older brother. Remember Jesus said that this man had *two* sons.

*“Meanwhile,”* Jesus continues ...

... at the same time as the father was welcoming his youngest son home and telling the servants to get ready for this big party and to invite the whole town (which is what would happen whenever a family would “kill the fatted calf”)

*Meanwhile ...*

... as everyone in the town is gathering to celebrate (even though they don’t quite understand the father’s unorthodox actions);

*“Meanwhile,” Jesus said, “the older son was in the fields working.”*

Because that’s what older sons do, right? They show up and do their duty. They observe the moral law because it’s the right thing to do – especially when you have a younger brother who rebels and squanders a third of the family fortune.

Anyway ... when the workday finally ended ...

*And when he returned home, [the older son] heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on.*

*“Your brother is back,” he was told, “and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are*

*celebrating because of his safe return.”*

*Luke 15:25-27 (NLT)*

**At this, Jesus said ...**

*“The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in.”*      *Luke*  
*15:28 (NLT)*

Now, imagine you’ve invited everyone to a party and one of your children comes and is so angry with what you’re doing they don’t even come into the house. Instead, they stand on the street and start yelling at you.

That’s what’s going on here. On the greatest day of his father’s life, his oldest son throws a hissy fit; a very public embarrassing tantrum.

And the whole town is watching and

thinking, “Wow, this guy has the two worst sons in all of Israel. One shames him in the pigsty and the other shames him in the front yard!”

Question: which one of them is worse?

Neither. *They're both equally bad.* Turns out, the older son is just as messed up as the younger. Though he always does the right thing on the outside, on the inside he is just as unclean and unholy as his kid brother.

So what does this crazy father do?

**Jesus says ...**

*“His father came out and begged him to come in.”* Luke  
15:29 (NLT)

For a second time in this story, instead of beating his rebellious son for humiliating him in front of the whole community, he does for him exactly what he did for his wayward son. He goes out to meet him.

Why? Because the love he has for his “moral son” is just as unmerited, unconditional, and unreasonable as his love for his wayward son.

Don't miss this (especially if you identify with this older brother more than the younger): *there's no special soft spot in the father's heart for the “young rebel in the pigsty” that isn't also there for the “slaving rebel in the fields.”*

But this son's reaction is very different from his brother's.

## **Instead of being blown away by the gracious action of his father ...**

*He replied, “All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one skinny little goat for a feast with my friends.”*

“Get the records,” he’s saying. “Get the timesheets, call the accountants and you will see how much I have done for you.”

*“Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!”*      Luke 15:28-30 (NLT)

In other words, “this is not fair. You are not fair.”

But is that true? Was the older brother being treated unfairly? Was the younger son getting a better deal?

Well ... remember how this story starts? The younger son makes the request and the father divides his estate between his sons ... which means that *the father has already given this boy two thirds of everything he owned.*

He’s *not* been treated like a slave. He’s been treated like the heir that he is!

And even though he has publicly dishonored and disgraced and humiliated his father just like his brother, his father has not rejected him either.

## The End of the Story

See, this crazy reckless father wants *both* of his sons to be close to him; to have a restored and right relationship with him.

He wants *both* of them to participate in the celebration ... which brings us to the odd ending of this story.

### **Jesus says ...**

*His father said to him, "Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!" Luke 15:31-32 (NLT)*

And that's the end of it.

And the reason I say it's an odd ending is that we don't know what the older brother does. We don't know if he says "now that I think about it father, *I, too*, have sinned against heaven and against you. I have disgraced you. I am not worthy to be called your son. And yet you have been so patient and loving and kind to me."

We don't know if he goes into the house and enjoys the party.

I'd like to *think* that's what happens. But I doubt it because we know who the older brother represents.

He represents the Pharisees and teachers of

the law. And, unfortunately, we know their response to Jesus' offer of grace and forgiveness for *their* sin. If there was a verse 33 to Luke 15 it would probably read "The older son in blind fury picked up his shovel and bashed his old man to death."

... because it wasn't the tax collectors and notorious sinners that convinced the Romans to nail Jesus to a cross. It was the leaders of the religious institution.

## **So What?**

Of course, as always, the question at this point is "so what?"

And the answer is (and I hope this is obvious) that the values of God's Kingdom are upside-down when compared to the

values of the institution of religion in three specific ways.

And I'll give these to you very quickly because they're very simple.

**1. Religion is about rehabilitation; the Kingdom is about restoring relationships.<sup>ii</sup>**

The Pharisees were angry with Jesus because he didn't make the tax collectors and sinners first clean up their act. And that's what religion is: "get your life in order and then you'll be acceptable." Rehabilitation precedes relationship.

But Jesus welcomed sinners and even ate with them without requiring them to do anything first because God's kingdom is first and foremost about restoring the

relationship with his children.<sup>iii</sup> In the Kingdom, relationship precedes rehabilitation.

**2. Religion is about “getting what you deserve;” the Kingdom is about getting *better* than you deserve.**

And that’s good news because what we all deserve – as this story reveals – is judgement because whether we’re the “good” older sibling or the “bad” younger sibling, we’re all sinners in our own way. We’ve all turned away from the Father whether it’s with our feet or with our hearts.

But when Jesus said he came to proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor” He really meant it. Everyone who enters into the Kingdom gets better than they deserve.

**3. Religion is about defining who is “in” and who is “out”; the Kingdom is about the reckless love of God that pursues both the insiders and the outsiders ...**

... the upstanding older brothers and sisters as well as their wayward youngers.

So many times we focus on what people do – their behavior – and we use that to judge and condemn because *religion* says that’s what matters most.

But in the Kingdom, what matters most is the Father’s love. He’s not impressed with how good you are or distressed over how bad you are. Those things are completely irrelevant to Him.

- He loves you no matter what bad you’ve done.

- And he doesn't love you because of what good you've done.
- He could not love you more
- And He could not love you less.

So, let go of religion and say “yes” to Jesus and His Kingdom.

Would you pray with me?

**Feature “Reckless Love”**

## **CLOSING COMMENTS**

1. Work as Worship THIS FRIDAY ... Sign up at table \$25 (we have scholarships)
2. Prayer down front

### 3. Next week the Upside Down Kingdom continues with “Top-Down Revolution”

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> This scenario is from Andy Stanley, *The Grace of God* (p. 214). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Stanley

<sup>iii</sup> Stanley, p215