

This Is Jesus: The Upside-Down Kingdom

Just One Rule

February 11, 2018

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

**Worship Songs – Promises / Good, Good Father
/ Prayer / It Is Well / T&G**

Video – Behind the Scenes

Feature Song – “Jesus Freak”

Good morning everyone.

And welcome to the beginning of the third of four mini-series within our mega-series *This Is Jesus ...* in which we are trying to come to a more complete and more accurate understanding of exactly who this man – Jesus of Nazareth – is that Christians (for 20 centuries) have claimed to be both the savior of the world and God-in-the-

flesh.

And the reason we're investing so much time into this topic (it'll be almost five months when we're finished after Easter) – the reason we're taking such a “deep dive” is two-fold:

First of all, because so many of us *do* believe that Jesus is our savior, it's easy to become so focused on what He did on the cross and in his resurrection that we overlook the fact that his life and ministry actually meant something as well.

See, Jesus didn't come just to die and rise again so we could be forgiven of our many sins (though He did). His coming was the dawn of a new day long prophesied by the ancient seers of

Israel.

“The Kingdom of God is at hand,” He would often say. “So change your thinking. Let go of your paradigms of how life should be; of who is in and who is out; of what matters and what does not.”

“Repent,” He would say (to use the biblical terminology), “and believe this good news.”

That was His primary message and His primary purpose: to inaugurate a new way of living that changes everything ... which leads to the second reason for this mega-series, which is that ...

The way of Jesus is the way to a better world individually and collectively.

And that's not an empty speculation or a braggadocios claim on my part but a historically verifiable truth.

In spite of what those who are antagonistic towards the faith would tell you; and even in spite of those followers of Jesus throughout the centuries who've gotten it very wrong (and what do you expect from a movement where the primary qualification for belonging is that you *must* be a sinner?) ...

There is simply no doubt that the teachings of Jesus and those who have attempted to live by them have been and continue to be radical game-changers in the global human experience. We talked about that in detail in the first message

of the previous mini-series, *Dawn of a New Day*, which, if you missed it, is available in the media section of our website and the North Heartland app.

So, bottom line ... if you're a Christian, I want you to know that who you believe in and trust for your eternal salvation has a lot to say about how to live your everyday life.

And if you're not a Christian (or even if you are), I want you to see that what Jesus offers is far better than what we are constantly offered by the institutions of our world, specifically:

- Our religious institutions.
- Our economic institutions.
- Our political institutions.

The religious institutions of our world tell us “here’s what you *do* to feel better about yourself; to escape the everyday pressures and realities of life; to connect with or appease whatever Supreme Eternal Being or Ultimate Life Force(s) there is.”

Economic institutions tell us “here’s what you need to *have* in order to experience the good life and here’s how you go about getting it and keeping it and spending it and making sure nobody takes what is yours.”

Political institutions tell us “here’s which person or party needs to be in *power*; here’s the ideal governmental system for all human beings; here’s how you make sure you and your tribe get at the head of the line in whatever system

exists.”

And it's been this way since the beginning of human history. Our world is socially-organized according to religion, economics and politics. And it is drilled into us from birth what it looks like to be a winner in each of those areas.

But along comes Jesus who says that *none of that stuff really matters.*

- To those who are religious and to those who are not ...
- To those who are rich and to those who are poor ...
- To those who are in power and to those who are not ...

Jesus says “you can join an unseen

Kingdom that exists right in the middle of all of this and even in spite of it. A Kingdom where the winners are not who everyone thinks they are ... where the values appear to be upside-down when compared to the values of this world ...”

... which means if you follow Jesus long enough *you will eventually become* something of a “freak” in comparison to everyone else. You’ll have to die with respect to the world’s institutions and expectations. But in doing so, Jesus says, you will find life.

So what we’re going to do over the next seven weeks – from now through Palm Sunday – is to discover what Jesus’ Kingdom is all about in the context of religion, economics and power.

The Code of Religion

And we're going to begin today with *religion* ... which I'm sure you know is a worldwide phenomenon.

What I mean by that is that there's nowhere you can go on the face of this earth where you will find a culture without some sense of a transcendent reality; a belief that there is a Force or a Supreme Being "out there somewhere" which has influence and power over our world. Though it may take different forms (and there are always skeptics), there is a universal conviction that we are not alone in our Universe.

And the fundamental question "religion" (of whatever form) attempts

to answer is “how do we approach and relate to this Force or Being?”

Furthermore, there is a universal belief that the Supreme Being(s) has set up some kind of moral code by which people are meant to live. And the purpose of “religion” is to define that code so that people know not only how to live – but also how to keep from getting on the wrong side of the Force or Being.

And of all the religions that have ever existed in this world, the Judaism of Jesus’ day stands above and beyond in its attempt to define that code.

Long before Jesus came onto the scene, the Jewish rabbis had developed what was known as *Midrash*. Midrash was a

verbal commentary explaining and interpreting each verse of the first five books of the Old Testament, which was known as the Torah or the Law of Moses (which included the Ten Commandments God had given on Mt. Saini).

Now, the Law itself was written down and copied by scribes for centuries. But the rabbinic commentary was preserved *orally*. That means it was memorized and passed down by word-of-mouth from one generation to another. Eventually, about 150 years after the time of Jesus, it along with Torah was written down into a document called the *Mishnah*.

The Mishnah filled 700 pages using small print. It was made up of six major

divisions, each with seven-to-twelve subdivisions which were further broken down into 523 chapters, with each chapter containing about five-to-ten paragraphs (which is why I said the Judaism of Jesus' day stands above and beyond in its attempt to define the moral code).

As for the contents of the oral interpretation, it covered the whole gamut of religious questions which might arise such as:

- If workers on top of a tree or wall offer a prayer, does God hear it?
- If a person is naked and prepares a dough offering from barley in their house, does their nakedness make the offering unclean?
- What's the proper death penalty for

someone who blasphemes – burning, stoning, beheading, or strangling?

- If an unclean bird sits on the eggs of a clean bird do the eggs remain ceremonially clean?
- If a dog eats the flesh of a dead animal and then lies at the door of a house does it make the house unclean?

On and on it goes, spelling out the do's and don'ts – the fine lines between sacred and profane.ⁱ

Now, this all sounds a bit silly to us moderns but I'm not trying to be critical in the least, because the purpose of Midrash and eventually, the Mishnah is awesome: *it's an earnest attempt to bring God and faith into the reality*

everyday life ...

... which is far better than the default cultural religion of our day: *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* we've called it – the belief that there is a “Big Powerful Somebody” out there who will show up to help us (or our country) whenever there is a problem but the rest of the time leaves us to ourselves; not really caring what we do as long as long as nobody else gets hurt.

By comparison, our cultural religion is no more than a self-centered spiritual veneer.

Now, in Jesus' day, the chief proponents of the Midrash – the strict application of the oral tradition surrounding the Torah – was the faction of Judaism known as

the Scribes and the Pharisees.

They took very seriously what God had spoken to Moses at Mt. Siani:

“If you obey Me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Exodus 19:6 (NIV)

And that was their vision. They wanted to create a culture of holiness among the people so that the presence of God would return to the Temple in Jerusalem as He had promised through the prophets. They wanted Israel to once again be God’s treasured possession as the Kingdom was restored.

And so the scribes and Pharisees made every effort to follow the rules and regulations of the oral tradition. And they often did so in a very public manner, hoping that their example would encourage everyone else to follow in their footsteps.ⁱⁱ

Jesus v. Religion

However, if you know much at all about the story of Jesus, you know that His greatest conflicts happened with this particular group specifically over the religious institution created by their oral traditions – their additions to the Mosaic Law.

Many times they would come to Him with questions designed to test his faithfulness to the vision of holiness (as

they defined it). And because Jesus didn't always give the "correct" answer (as they defined it), eventually those questions became attempts to trick Him into saying something blasphemous.

For instance, in the 22nd chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we read that the followers of the Pharisees come to him and say:

"Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are.

In case you're wondering, yes, they're sucking up to Jesus. They're saying "we know you're going to speak the truth regardless of the consequences."

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“Tell us then,” they continue, “what is your opinion? Is it right [lawful] to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

By the way, that specific tax was only paid by people who had been subjugated to the Romans.

Therefore, paying it was, in the minds of the Pharisees, tantamount to idolatry because, as we’ve seen several times in this series, Caesar claimed to be divine. So to encourage paying the tax was to encourage the worship of someone other than Yahweh.

On the other hand, for Jesus to declare that it was wrong (literally, “unlawful”

or “out of line with the Law and Midrash”) to pay the tax ... that would put him at odds with the Romans.

It was the perfectly devised trick question.

Matthew continues:

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.”

They brought him a denarius, and he asked them ...

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“Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” Matthew 22:16-22 (NIV)

Matthew concludes by saying that they were amazed at his answer and they left him.

Now, here’s why they were amazed at His answer – and we’re going to expound on this idea for a bit.

They were amazed because religious institutions inevitably become convoluted and confused, but Jesus brings simplicity and clarity.

Institutional religion (whether it’s Judaism or Islam or Catholicism or

Protestantism in its many flavors or any other spiritual “ism” you can think of) always drills further and further down into the details and becomes a confusing and convoluted checklist of:

- Right vs. wrong
- Pure vs. impure
- Holy vs. profane

And religion does that because *that’s pretty much what most of us want*. We want rules that tell us that tell us what is acceptable and what is not.

- Should a good first-century Jew pay the tax to Caesar?
- Should a good Christian baker make a cake for a gay wedding?
- Should a committed follower of Jesus vote for a President who

seems to lack basic human decency
(as we define it)?

- Is it OK for a Christian to smoke pot? Or play the lottery? Or move in together? Or whatever?
- How much money can I make and spend on myself without being greedy?
- How much do I need to recycle to be a good steward of Creation?

Of course, *knowing* the rules doesn't we're planning to *keep* them. It just helps us to know where the lines are or, as one of my favorite preachers, Andy Stanley, puts it: "what's the absolute minimum I need to do to get by spiritually?"

Now, just to be clear, I'm not saying that was the original intention of those who

developed the Midrash and transmitted it over hundreds of years. They were trying to do a good thing.

What I'm saying is that the nature of institutional rule-based religion is to become convoluted and confused but Jesus brings simplicity and clarity. He takes the typical either/or thinking of religion and turns it on its head ... which is exactly what happens in His response to the question of paying taxes to Caesar.

Jesus is saying “this isn't an either/or question. You can give to Caesar what belongs to him and is made in his image – the coin of the realm ... while also giving to God what belongs to *Him* is made in *His* image – *you*.”

And what's amazing about that is that Jesus illustrates once again (as we saw two weeks ago) that it's possible to be *in* the world while not being *of* the world. In other words, you *have* to pay Caesar but you *don't* have to be driven by his values.

Jesus & the Sabbath

Of course, to anyone who is serious about their religion, Jesus' statement about giving to God what belongs to Him and is made in His image raises another question, doesn't it?

What exactly does that mean? How do you do it?

Well, the Scribes and the Pharisees had quite a few rules that covered it, but one

stood out above all the others. If you were a good Jewish man or woman who truly wanted to give to God what belonged to Him, you would faithfully and consistently *keep the Sabbath ...*

... which was the sixth of the Ten Commandments:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy,” the Lord said to Moses. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

“For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the

earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” Exodus 20:8-11 (NIV)

Now, the reason why Sabbath-keeping was so important is that not only was it one of the Ten Commandments, it was also a distinctive feature of Hebrew faith. The Sabbath is what set them apart from the surrounding nations.

In fact, after giving Moses the Ten Commandments, God repeats this particular command and adds to it:

“You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who

makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you.” Exodus 31:13-14 (NIV)

Keeping the Sabbath was to be a testimony – a sign – both to the Jews and to the nations around them that Yahweh was ultimately providing for them, not their own hard work and ingenuity.

Now, because you and I are not part of a Sabbath-keeping culture it’s a little challenging for us to understand exactly what this must have looked like in the first century. So, to help us with that, we’re going to turn once again to our Holy Land tour guide, Pastor Andrew Gardener of The Vine Church in Hong Kong.

Let’s watch.

Video clip – The Power of the Sabbath (3.6 mins)

(Begin) Andrew: “The old city of Jerusalem ...”

(End) Andrew: “That's the beauty and power of the Sabbath.”

And that was the original intention: for the Jewish people to call a weekly timeout to remember they were special because of their reliance on God.

Unfortunately, by the time that Jesus came onto the scene, the religious institution had done to it what religious institutions always do: Sabbath-keeping had become just one more complicated checklist designed to measure a person’s level of holiness.

In the video, Andrew mentioned that

there were 39 types of work prohibited on the Sabbath but, when the Midrash – the additional interpretation and rules – of how to keep the Sabbath was finally put into written form (in the Mishnah), it added up to 36 pages of rules; 243 paragraphs ... many of those spelling out in great detail what was and was not prohibited.

For instance, camel drivers and sailors couldn't tie knots on the Sabbath. But knots for hair nets, sandals, and belts were permissible. And it was as wrong to untie a knot as to tie one.

Another example: In Hebrew thinking, there were four types of space – public, private, neutral, and free – and Sabbath rules dictated what kinds of material could lawfully be moved from one space

to another. And if a person *threw* anything from a private to a public space or vice versa, they were guilty of working on the Sabbath.

The list could go on and on but I think you get the idea.

As Donald Kraybill puts it in his book, *The Upside-Down Kingdom ...*

“The Sabbath symbolized the peak of institutionalized religion.”

And again, remember, the intention was good. Like all the other rules, the Sabbath rules were an earnest attempt to bring God and the Law He had given into everyday life. But the effect turned out to be exactly the opposite.

In the 13th chapter of Luke’s Gospel we

read that ...

One Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all.

When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Now, get this:

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath,

the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

Luke 13:10-14 (NIV)

Do you understand the absurdity of what he’s saying? “Don’t be bringing the power of God in here on the Sabbath!”

But *that’s the purpose of the rules*, isn’t it – to bring God’s presence into real life?

Mark (as well as Luke and Matthew) writes of ...

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason

to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

Obviously, Jesus had developed a reputation. So what do you think He does?

You guessed it.

Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

Matthew tells us that Jesus said ...

“Which one of you who has

a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

*Matthew 12:11-12
(NIV)*

Mark writes that ...

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.”

He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

Mark concludes:

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Mark 3:1-6 (NIV)

... because that's what you do to Sabbath-breakers.

Now, why was Jesus so angry and distressed? Because the obsession with keeping the rules in all of their complexity had obscured and obliterated the very point of the Sabbath.

Or, as Jesus put it following yet *another* confrontation over the issue:

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:28 (NIV)

In other words, the Sabbath was designed to serve *people* as a time of physical, emotional, and psychological refreshment. It was to be the servant, not the master.

But over the years, as the oral law grew, that understanding was turned upside down and the Sabbath became the master. It enslaved people. Instead of rest it gave them new things to worry about ... which is why many people *instead of welcoming the Sabbath began to welcome the workdays* which freed them from its burdens.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Bigger Picture

Now, we've spent a lot of time talking about what was wrong with the institution of religion in Jesus' day so it

would be natural to assume that Jesus' point was "just reject it. Turn your back and walk away from it."

But that *wasn't* His point. He didn't say "don't worry about keeping the Sabbath" just like He didn't say "don't pay your taxes to that so-called divine impostor, Caesar."

As we discovered two weeks ago, Jesus wasn't all that interested in either endorsing or changing the institutions of His day because I think He knew that the nature of religious institutions is always to make things more convoluted and confusing. They will always try to assume the role of master instead of servant.

And I think He knew that political

institutions and their leaders are always going to make more of themselves than they really are. They will always try to assume god-like status over your life.

And His attitude was basically, “So what? That’s just the real world. But the good news is that God’s kingdom exists right alongside of them and in spite of them!”

“So give back to Caesar what already belongs to him but give yourself to God. And keep the Sabbath but remember who and what it’s for. Do what they tell you to do but do not lose sight of the bigger picture.”

So what *is* the bigger picture when it comes to the institution of religion – specifically the Jewish religion and by

inheritance, the Christian religion?

One day an expert in the Torah and Midrash came to test Jesus, wanting to know His take on which commandment was the most important.

Jesus answered:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

And then Jesus said – and this is amazing:

“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Matthew 22:37-

As I said earlier, whereas religious institutions inevitably complicate and confuse things, Jesus brings simplicity and clarity.

“Love God, love people.” That’s it. That’s the bigger picture. That’s what it all comes down to.

So, do you want to know what the right thing is to do in any given situation? You don’t need 700 pages and 523 chapters to tell you. There’s just one rule: *act out of love God and love for people.*

Actually, that’s not a completely accurate statement of the rule.

The actual rule Jesus gives goes like this:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

John 13:34 (NIV)

In the same way that Jesus has loved us (He gave his *life* for us) and *because* Jesus has loved us (as those greatly matter to Him), that’s how and why we are to love one another.

“Love one another as I have loved you.”
That’s the rule to rule all rules.

Ok, let’s get practical.

Do you know why you should be generous? Why you should not spend every dollar on yourself and your inner

circle?

It's not because the Bible says God will bless you for giving (though it does and He will). It's because when you are generous to people and causes that can't pay you back, it expresses your love for those people and causes.

Do you know why you shouldn't talk about someone behind their back?

It's not because the Bible says don't gossip (which it does). The reason you shouldn't gossip is because it hurts someone else. It undermines their integrity in the minds of other people. And that's not love.

Do you know why you shouldn't pressure your girlfriend or boyfriend sexually?

Not because the Bible says sex is for marriage (though it does). It's because imposing your will on someone else isn't loving your neighbor as yourself, it's loving yourself at the expense of your neighbor.

See how simple that is? In any situation the question is always "what does love require of me?"^{iv}

Of course, just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, it's actually a lot more demanding than following a bunch of rules because you actually have to think and pray and weigh things out. And you might come up with a different answer in this

situation and with this person than you would in another.

For instance, when our oldest daughter got her drivers license, it didn't take long for us to realize that the most loving thing we could do for her was to give her complete freedom and become (basically) her life-coach. So we did away with her curfew along with all other expectations of what she did and with whom.

Why? Because she wasn't developing a conscience of her own. Instead of standing up for what she believed in, she was hiding behind what her momma and I believed in. Instead of defining the boundaries herself, she was resting too much on ours. And you cannot go through life like that. You'll wind up in

all kinds of trouble.

So we gave her complete freedom. And it was so uncomfortable for her and for us. All of our friends thought we were nuts. (All of *her* friends thought we were cool). But it was the most loving thing we could do as parents.

Now, when our *second daughter* reached that point, the most loving thing to do was exactly the opposite. Oh we tried the “complete freedom” approach but it quickly became clear: *that was not a good idea.*

Why? Because she was *ignoring* her conscience. Instead of making decisions based on what she knew was right, she went by whatever made her fun and popular. And you cannot go through life

like that. You'll wind up in all kinds of trouble.

So not only did we reinstate the boundaries, we tightened them. And it was so uncomfortable for her and for us.

In fact, it put such a strain on our relationship that I wondered if it would ever heal. But it was the most loving thing we could do as parents. And I know it doesn't always turn out this way but she eventually realized that and actually thanked us.

By the way, notice that asking "what does love require of me?" isn't the same as asking "what will make them happy?" No one was happy at the time we made those decisions.

And I realize this is such an isolated example and very specific to my family, but I think it illustrates the point. Do you want to know what the right thing is to do in any given situation? Love God and love others in the same way God loves us.

Conclusion

Of course, when you start thinking in this way and trying to act in this way, you're always going to wonder "but how do I *know* what's the most loving approach to take? How do I know what love requires of me?"

And the answer is ... you might not know. Or you might *think* you know and then, later, realize you didn't know. And even if you *do* know, it might not work

out as you hoped.

But the one thing that *will* happen is that you will begin to experience more and more of the power and presence of God in your everyday life ... which – what do you know – is what rule-based institutional religion tries to deliver but cannot. But that can be yours in the upside-down world that Jesus called the Kingdom of God where Love ... not Law ... is supreme.

Would you stand with me for closing prayer?

“What does love require?” Jesus, you asked that and the answer was that love for us required your life.

Help us to live out of that love and to

love God and others in that same way.
Give us a vision for

- What might happen in our families if we asked “what does love require of me?”
- Of what might happen in our relationships at work
- Of what might happen in our relationships with people who are not of our tribe.
- Of what might happen if our city paused and thought about that question for a month.

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Unique opportunity: Work as Worship
... sign up soon! Details in the program!

Endnotes

ⁱ Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, pg 152

ⁱⁱ Kraybill, 153

ⁱⁱⁱ Kraybill, pg 157

^{iv} From Andy Stanley's message *What Love Requires* in his series *Brand: New*.