

The Outsider's Kingdom – 1/7/2007

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At Woodland Hills, we just study the Bible, because the kingdom is not about entertainment. The kingdom is about transformation, and we believe there's power in the word, that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, Romans 10:17. There are certain messages that should come with a warning label, and this is one of them. The warning label is "Watch Out. It's Radical." For those who are visiting or who are new to Woodland Hills Church, if you come from a traditional background, some of what will be said today is going to be outside of categories that you've had before. I encourage you to keep an open mind and always be asking the question: Is this the word of God? Because it doesn't matter what Greg thinks. What matters is what's revealed in the Word. So just be listening with this grid on. But the truth is, and here's the warning, the kingdom is more bizarre and more radical than most of us have ever dreamed. We are conditioned, especially those of us who are raised in Christendom, to read the Bible through the lenses of 'religiosity,' and we miss all the radical stuff. And my job here is to let that radical stuff rise up and shine. We're going to be moving, believe it or not, onto the next 16 verses of Luke 4. Now, we may be dealing with the same 16 verses for the next two years, for all I know, that's how it goes around here, but I don't think so. Finally, we're moving on from the temptation narratives to Luke 4, verses 14-30. As I'm dealing with this passage, I'm going to be raising some questions. In some ways, I see the church sort of Jacob-wrestling with the angel of the Lord for a blessing. And sometimes you've got to wrestle with the Word and dig into it and work to find the treasure that is there, but it is always worth it. So we're going to be raising some questions.

Let's read the text. Jesus, just having been tempted in the desert, it says:

"And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up."

So he's going to his hometown now.

"And, as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read."

When you hear synagogue, don't think of a church building. They didn't have church buildings. They were synagogues back in those days. It would be someone's designated house; probably the person with the biggest house; it was just called the synagogue, and that's where the people in the town of Nazareth, which was a very small town, would gather together and study the word and sing some psalms, and they'd pray. So you've got to think of a gathering, probably, of around 20-30 people. It might have been a little more here because Jesus was something of a celebrity already. But it wouldn't be a gathering like this, by any means. So they're gathering together in someone's house, which is used as a synagogue.

"And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him."

Note that it's a scroll and not a book. They didn't have books back in those days. They were just rolled up parchment. And so, to read the Bible, you had to unroll the scroll and get to the place. It was a time-consuming thing to get to the place you wanted to read from. What would usually happen was they had a leader of a synagogue, the elder of the synagogue, not necessarily an ordained Rabbi, but the elder would either assign a text or reading to somebody and ask someone to read the text and speak what you feel the Lord is telling you about this text. Or sometimes they would open it to volunteers. 'Who would like to read or preach?' So we don't know whether Jesus was appointed or volunteered, but one way or another, Jesus stands up, goes to the front of the synagogue, and opens the scroll.

"And He opened the book," unrolling it, "and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.'"

Jesus here is reading Isaiah 61:1-2, although, we'll see here in a moment he's reading it in a little bit of a strange way. He mentions the year of the Lord's favor, and most scholars agree that this is a reference to the Year of Jubilee in the Old Testament. The Year of Jubilee meant that every 50 years all debts were cancelled, all prisoners were freed from prison, land was restored to the original owner, etc. etc. All slates were wiped clean for an entire year once every 50 years. That was the year of the Lord's favor. And what this text is saying is that when Messiah comes, He'll proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. But they all understood the year wasn't a literal year, it's an epic; it's an age; it's a period of time, and we're still in this period of time.

Then it says:

"And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant," or the elder, "and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him."

They're staring at him; kind of a dramatic silence.

"And He began to say to them, 'Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'"

For crying out loud; the son of a carpenter, and he's talking like this? Now, Luke leaves out what those gracious words were, but they clearly would be expounding on this Year of Jubilee; what the Lord has come to do. And Jesus was here presenting Himself as the Messiah. And now things begin to get strange. Get your thinking caps on; we're going to start thinking here.

"And He said to them, 'no doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.' And He said, 'Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown.'"

Now, here's what's weird. Why is Jesus all of a sudden picking a fight? It says they were speaking well about him, and they're amazed at his gracious words, and all of a sudden Jesus is like, 'You'll probably say go heal yourself, physician; do some miracles like you did in other places! Well, I'm telling you, your prophets aren't accepted in their own hometowns.' Well, it's like they were trying to accept you, and you're picking a fight! Isn't that weird? I think it's weird. Why is he so cynical about his own kinfolk, for crying out loud? But it gets weirder, listen to this.

"But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow."

And my question is: What has that got to do with the price of asparagus in Britain on Tuesday? That's random! Why does Jesus all of a sudden tell this story, and why does he throw in these details about where this particular widow came from? But it gets weirder!

"And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

And what's that got to do with the temperature of the dark side of the moon? Why is he bringing this up and what's with all these random details? Who cares about the name of the guy and where he's from? And what's the point of this whole thing, anyway? But it gets even weirder!

"And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things."

Why? They're Sunday School stories, for crying outloud! Why would they be ticked off at that? I never noticed any of this before this week, by the way, when I started studying for this message. It's like when you start getting into it, it's like, what is this? This is weird. Why are they mad at him? Why is He mad at them? What's going on? It's the Matrix!

"And they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff."

They were really ticked off at this homeboy! Why? Because he told two Sunday School lessons about two healings? What would make them so mad about that?

"But passing through their midst, He went His way."

We're not told how that happened. Did he say something that all of a sudden brought them to their senses, and they realized what they were doing? Did he use some kind of supernatural power? We're not told, but Jesus thankfully gets out with his life.

As is often the case, sometimes the best nuggets in the word are found by wrestling with some questions. So I'll break down my questions about this text into three groups.

Question one: If the people of Nazareth spoke well of Jesus and they were amazed at his gracious words, why did Jesus get so cynical towards them all of a sudden? What was up with that? Let's try to make sense of that.

Question two: Why two seemingly random stories about two prophets with their seemingly random details? Why does that happen out of the blue?

And, question three: Why do the townspeople act so violently to Jesus' message when He tells these two Sunday School stories? What's up with this? And I believe if we can answer those questions we're going to find here a profound teaching. In fact, I believe it's the central point of this passage. I will tell you up front that this is my way of reading this text, but it's not the only way of reading this text; but, since I'm the one doing the talking, it's the right way of reading this text. So take it for what it's worth, chew on it, and always be comparing scripture with scripture.

I want to give five points of teaching here—five considerations—which I think begin to make sense out of this text and kind of yank out the profundancy of the text.

Point 1—You need to know that the word 'amazed' in Greek, *'thaumazo'*, is not necessarily a positive word. It can mean amazed in a negative sense, as in *shocked*; so bear that in mind.

Point 2—It says that the people spoke well about Jesus—they spoke well of Him. The phrase 'spoke well', *martureo*, means 'to bear witness.' We get the word *martyr* from it and it means 'to bear witness.' It can also be a neutral term—to bear witness. It doesn't necessarily have to be positive. The phrase 'of him', *altos* in Greek, is in the dative case, which means it can be translated 'of him' but it can also be translated 'against him.' So the phrase can be translated they bore witness 'of him' or 'for him,' on the one hand, or it can be translated that they bore witness 'against him.' It could be that they were amazed and spoke well about Him or it could be that they were shocked and spoke badly about Him. The context has to determine which one is true. And I suggest to you it makes a whole lot more sense to think it was the second one—it was a negative reaction that they were having.

Now, why would they be shocked at what Jesus was saying? There are two things indicated in the text; the first one is my Point 3, they asked the question 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' Think about this; Jesus just read Isaiah 62, which is one of the most famous Messianic passages in the Old Testament. 'Messianic' means that the passage prophesizes about a coming Messiah, and Jesus just applied this to himself! So we can understand how the people in this town who knew Jesus since he was a little kid might be a little bit surprised. This is a little, snotty-nosed kid who was always hanging around—and granted, he was a perfect kid, but even perfect little toddlers can get into trouble—and he had to learn obedience by the things which he suffered (Heb. 5:8) like everybody else. So they had a very normal view of Jesus and here he is, the carpenter's son, claiming to be the Messiah. Not only that, but never forget that Jesus had a reputation—and this would not have gone away quietly in first century Judaism—but he was born out of wedlock! Mary had told the story that some people knew about with the angel or whatever, but how many people believe that one? So there's this carpenter's kid who was born out of wedlock, and he's standing up and proclaiming he's the Messiah! That would shock these people.

The second thing, however, is even more fundamental. Luke says that they were *thaumazo*, they were shocked, at his gracious words. Now, why would they be shocked at his gracious words? Or his words of shocking grace? You could put it like that. One indication might be found if you go back to the original verse that Jesus was reading here—keep your thinking caps on. We go back to the original; what was Jesus reading? That might tell us why these people were shocked. Here's what you find in the original, although, Jesus quotes the verse just like it's found in the original, but here's what the original says in Isaiah 61:2b:

“The Messiah comes to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God.”

When Jesus reads the passage, he just proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. He doesn't go on to finish it—he doesn't mention “the day of vengeance of our God.” And, see, to many Jews in the first century, that part about vengeance was very important, maybe even the most important. The way most Jews in the first century would read this passage—and remember, the Jews are under pagan rule, they're under the rule of the Romans, and the Romans can be oppressive and nasty and mean. Life isn't much fun for Jews of the first century under Roman rule. And the way they would read this passage from Isaiah 61 would be something like this. The Messiah is going to come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to us insiders, and the day of vengeance of our God towards those outsiders. And to the Jew of the first century, both were part of the Good News. It's Good News that God is going to have favor on us, but it's also Good News that those nasty, mean-spirited, immoral, God-rebellious Romans who are gentiles and pagans, are finally going to get their due. They're both part of the Good News. And, in fact, here is where you'll get the loudest amen, when you get to the vengeance part on how God is going to have vengeance on all those mean, nasty, people (that we want to get even with, anyway). Here's where the crowd really gets rallied together. Here's where we celebrate that we are us and they are them, and we get blessed and they get judged. Here's where the Jew of the first century would say, now we can really say amen to the fact that we are Jewish and not like those pagans, and we are clean and not like those unclean sinners, and we are elect and not like those reprobates, and we're on the inside and they're on the outside, and we get grace and they get curses, and we are the ones who are righteous and keep the Law and those people just do all these immoral acts and don't keep the Law, and, finally, God's gonna stick it to them and we're looking forward to that day. And that's where they really rally together, they're going to get their due—finally, it will pay off—that we have sacrificed so much to walk with God. And those folks don't do diddley-squat; and then we'll see that all our sacrifices have been worth it.

See, there's something about all religion, for all the good it sometimes does, religion gravitates towards—call it the ‘vengeance clause’. We like that vengeance clause. You can get a crowd rallied in a real frenzy with a vengeance clause. There are some sociologists who say you can't get a crowd together and get a real unity going, and a vibrancy going, unless you have a vengeance clause. You need some common enemy; somebody to rally against; us versus them. Humans, in our fallen nature, feed off of the us/them contrast; we like the us/them contrast. And, what religion does is bring the us/them contrast into the throne of heaven and exacts vengeance on the them and blessings on the us. You want to see a good picture of this, just turn on the news and watch what's happening in Iraq right now. It's the us/them

vengeance clause exacted 10-, 20-, 40-million times a day. One group kills some loved ones of another group and that group says, “We pledge vengeance on that group; Allah will have vengeance on that group.” Then they strike and kill some of their friends, and then they pledge vengeance, “Allah will have vengeance on that group.” And then we have this Allah group against that Allah group and all the vengeance is going on. And all of that, by the way, is simply a sort of intensified microcosm of world history. World history is a bloodbath of people exacting vengeance in the name of God. Because, see, there’s a very small step between believing that God’s going to exact vengeance on your enemy, on the one hand, and believing that God’s called you to exact vengeance on your enemy. Very closely aligned together, which is why—and this may strike you as odd for a pastor to say—but remember that the kingdom of God is not about religion; in fact, it’s about the opposite of religion. Religion is one of the most dangerous things on the planet. It does good, yes, but it’s also one of the most dangerous things, precisely because you get a ‘god authority’ and god christens your basic vengeance instincts. The only thing that’s more dangerous than religion, I’m convinced, is religion mixed with politics. And a lot of bloodshed in world history—most of the bloodshed in world history—is the result of people doing their politics in the name of some god or other. I thought I’d get a little amen on that one anyway. Yes! Religion is dangerous.

So these Jews of the first century are understandably really mad at the Romans, and they want that vengeance clause. Yes, the Good News is about God’s favored us, but it’s also about God’s vengeance towards them. So, as Jesus is teaching this verse, some of them are sitting on the edge of their seat and wringing their hands like, this is the good part, and they’re getting ready to say amen, we’re going to wave the flag, the cross and the sword, and this is where we’re going to celebrate the vengeance—and...Jesus stops! I’ve come to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and they’re going, and—and—and—come on, come on, bring it home now, bring it down the stretch, come on, brother, lay it on us...and Jesus stops! Now, you know what—Jesus does believe that God will have a day of vengeance, but what He’s doing is driving a wedge, a temporal wedge, between what He’s about in this day of Jubilee and a vengeance that is to come. And, by the way, if you study the teachings of Jesus carefully, you’ll see that when vengeance finally does come, it’s not always on the people that you thought it was going to come on. There’s always this kind of surprise reversal. Yeah, that’s a different sermon. Right now I just want us to see that Jesus is saying the Year of Jubilee, this epoch of Jubilee when it comes, this isn’t the time of vengeance; rather this is the time of ollie, ollie, in-free. God is proclaiming a wiping of the slate clean for you, yes, but also for them. In other words, God is leveling the playing field; God is collapsing the us/them distinction; God is saying this is the epoch of grace for everyone, this is the epoch of God’s love for everyone; this is the epoch of forgiveness for everybody; this is the ollie, ollie in-free. And see, if you were getting life from the us/them distinction, this isn’t Good News to you. All of a sudden you mean the Good News is going to come to our enemies? And some of the people don’t like it and so they get ticked off. And now you can begin to understand why they might be shocked and angry at what Jesus is saying.

But it gets worse; it gets worse. And this brings us to the fifth point. Why did Jesus bring in the two apparent random stories with all this apparent random detail? Why did he bring up the story in verses 25 and 26 about Elisha ministering to the widow at Zarephath? And why the story about Elijah and then

Elisha ministering to Naaman the Syrian leper? Make sense out of this! Whenever you see something that's totally unintelligible or irrational in the Bible, it's time to start digging because, usually, there's something you don't know that will make sense out of the whole picture.

Here's what's going on. Those seemingly random details are not random at all. In fact, those details are the point of these stories. When Jesus says that the widow was at Zarephath in Sidon, what he's saying there is that she wasn't Jewish. In fact, she was in Zarephath in Sidon, which was in enemy territory, and God in the midst of this famine. After 3½ years, how many hungry widows were in the land of Israel? Wouldn't you think that God would first minister to the widows of his chosen people; that he'd first take care of their needs? And, if there are any leftovers, then go to the pagans. But who's expecting him to do that anyway? But, instead, what God does is pass by those who you would think were on the inside, and he ministers and saves the life of this widow, who is a widow in pagan territory. Jesus is using it as an example of Good News, bypassing those who you thought would receive it, those who are insiders, to bring it to those who are on the outside.

Then He uses the second story, which is even more radical; Naaman of Syria. If you look at 2 Kings, Chapter 5, you'll find that Naaman was this leper from Syria, which is pagan, so he's pagan, not Jewish; but not only that, but he's the captain of the Syrian Army. And not only that, but Israel—right in this episode that Jesus is talking about—is in the middle of a long and very vicious war with the Syrians. This is the guy who's leading the charge to slaughter the Israelites. And in the midst of this, Elisha ministers to Naaman.

Here's what happened. Naaman had captured—this is pretty typical for the ancient world, and still goes on today—he had captured some Israelites, and he spots some cute-looking Jewish girl and decides he wants to make her one of his wives, so she's one of his wives. He's a leper, so that's not really good news, is it? This young Jewish girl has her wits about her, so she tells this pagan, "There's a guy in Israel who maybe can heal you; his name is Elisha, and he does miracles sometimes." And so, even though there's this war going on, Naaman sneaks out, brings his entourage to Elisha's house. It's a beautiful story; it's one of the most gracious stories you'll find in the whole Old Testament. He sneaks out and goes to Elisha in order to get a healing from the guy, who maybe that day he was trying to kill. And Elisha doesn't want his money, but he does—in order to make a long story short—gives Naaman this healing, and Naaman is ultimately healed. And what Jesus is saying here is this: Think of all the lepers there were in Israel—hundreds, maybe thousands of lepers that were in Israel, wouldn't you think that God would have gone to the Israelites first? They are his chosen people, after all! But, instead, this story is an example of how God—his grace is so upside down that it bypasses all the people you think would receive it, and he goes to not only a pagan, but the worst of the pagans, the one who is the head of the army who's fighting against us. Your national enemy, your worst enemy gets the healing and you don't.

And now we can begin to understand why these people wanted to kill Jesus. Because Jesus is saying here that his ministry is going to have that kind of flavor to it. This ministry is not going to go to the ones you would expect it to go to. That's why all the people he mentions in this passage are the outcasts, the marginalized, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the nobodies. He's saying this ministry is going to go to

outsiders; it will be rejected by at least most of the insiders who you would have thought would have got it, and it's going to go to the outsiders. This is going to be a ministry. It's going to be a kingdom that Jesus is bringing. This era of Jubilee is going to bypass, on the whole, the Israelites, and it's going to go to the pagan widows and these captains of the national enemies of Israel. On the whole, it's going to bypass the righteous and go to the unrighteous. It's going to bypass the religious, and it's going to go to the sinners. It's going to bypass those who you would think would know about it and receive it and it's going to be brought to people who don't have a clue about it. Those who are on the inside are going to find themselves on the outside and those on the outside are going to find themselves with this giant bear hug and, all of a sudden, being placed on the inside. In other words, Jesus is saying that this kingdom that He's bringing, this era that He's inaugurating, this ollie, ollie in-free Year of Jubilee proclamation is going to turn everything on its head. It's going to be the absolute reverse of what religious common sense would have expected it to be. The first shall be last, the exalted shall be humbled, the humbled shall be exalted, the last shall be first; it's all upside down. Those you thought were going to receive it, don't, and they reject it; and those who you thought would be absolutely impossible to get it, those are the ones who get it. This upside-down, topsy-turvy, radical, in-your-face flavor, this Elisha, Elijah flavor, permeates everything Jesus was about.

Now, we often miss it because we're often conditioned to read the Bible through religious spectacles, and we sanitize Jesus. We tame Him down. We get kind of a churchified, religious, Christendom Jesus. But the Jesus of the gospel, everything about Him screams this radical counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, counter-religious, anti-religious theme as the grace of God that breaks all the normal rules is exploded into this world.

I'll give you one example of how this looks from the ministry of Jesus. This is from Luke, Chapter 18, and Luke, by the way, emphasizes this theme more than any of the other gospels; although, they all have it. Luke 18 is a passage that we'll probably be getting to, I'm estimating, around the year 2017. But here's what it says; listen carefully.

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else."

Stop! The main flow of the kingdom is not those society-destroying sinners who are acting in immoral, debauchorous ways and ruining our culture and destroying the world; it's not those people that we are just waiting for God to exact vengeance on. The main opponents of the gospel, the main opponents of the kingdom are, rather, those who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on other people because they are confident of their own righteousness. Those who are absolutely certain that they're on the inside as opposed to those outsiders and who get life from that, they were the main opponents of the kingdom in Jesus' day, and they're the main opponents of the kingdom today because the kingdom always looks like Jesus with this radical mercy and this radical servanthood mindset.

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else."

Now, Jesus loves these people, so he's giving this message in the hope that they'll wake up; trying to jar them to wake up, because he loves these people. He tells this parable:

“Two men went up to the Temple to pray; one was a Pharisee and one was a tax collector.”

This is the best of the best and the worst of the worst!

“The Pharisee stood by himself in the Temple and prayed ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like other people, robbers and evildoers and adulterers and even like that tax collector over there.’”

Stop for a moment. It would be easy for me to exaggerate that so much that it would be easy for us to all excuse ourselves. Like, “Oh, God, I’m so glad I’m righteous and not like that person!” But I don’t think the guy was praying...there’s nothing in the text that suggests that this was anything but a sincere prayer. When I was first a Christian, this is how I prayed. I’ll bet a lot of us have prayed that way. “God, I’m just so thankful that I’m not like that. I know I’m not perfect, but I know I’m not like that person. I don’t have that deal-breaker sin. I’m thankful that I’m not like those evil doers, those adulterers, those who are going to get your vengeance and all of that, Lord. I’m thankful that I’m an insider and not an outsider.” I think a lot of us were taught to pray that way. “I’m so thankful, God, that I fast twice a week”—man, this guy outdoes most of us. I, actually, fast three times a week, so I do outdo him, but I didn’t want to mention that! I fast between meals—six times a day! No! Okay.

“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all that I get.”

I like this guy.

“But the tax collector stood at a distance.”

He doesn’t fast, he doesn’t tithe; in fact, he rips his own people off on behalf of the Roman government. This guy was so aware of his unworthiness, he stood at a distance; he couldn’t go before the altar. He was unworthy. He understood that. He wouldn’t even look up to heaven. So far was he from doing any works to impress God that he doesn’t even lift his head to heaven. He simply beats his breasts and says, “God, have mercy on me,” because I am a goner! He knows he’s a goner. If it turns out God’s not merciful, I’m a fried man. “I tell you,” Jesus says, “that this man, rather than that Pharisee, went home justified.” The same word Paul uses when he says we’re justified by faith. He was justified before God. Why? Because everyone that exalts themselves in their own mind, in their own righteousness, they will be humbled. But all those who humble themselves and put themselves in the position of this tax collector, they will eventually be exalted. They will turn out to be the insiders as opposed to the outsiders!

To grasp this story accurately, we’ve got to try to contextualize it. The tax collector is the scum of the earth in the Jewish mind in the first century. Sum of the earth; worse than the pagans, because they worked for the pagans and they make their living by ripping off their own people. When we think of the tax collectors, we’ve got to get in our mind the worst of the worst. I don’t know what that would be for you, but for me it would be like a drug-dealing pedophile. And when you think of the Pharisee, you’ve got to think of the best of the best, the person you’re most certain is going to heaven. And that’s how they would view the Pharisee. If anyone’s confident, it’s the Pharisee, so we should probably think of some upstanding Christian, but one who is very confident of their ‘inside’ status; one who is very confident of

their own righteousness and, therefore, tends to look down on those tax collectors, who are, after all, the problem with society.

Here's what's wrong with the world. It's not my sin, it's their sin, so it's the upstanding Christian. And what Jesus is saying is that this pedophiling, drug-dealing sinner, if he comes to the awareness that he's in desperate need of God's mercy, he goes home justified; whereas, this other upstanding person professing Christ but still full of their own righteousness and contrasting themselves with the drug-dealing pedophiles, that person stands in a dangerous, precarious position in relationship with God.

You talk about the tables being turned, that's about as turned as you can get. Jesus' ministry is full of this. At one point, He says to a group of Pharisees, and this is the kind of thing that gets this guy crucified, there wasn't an ounce of popularity contest in Jesus, believe me. He says:

"Truly, I tell you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of you."

That's not what they wanted to hear! And these are people who simply are doing all the sacrifices, doing all the fasting, all the tithes, always going to the synagogue, doing all the right things. But, see, they're feeding off it, and they contrast themselves with the tax collectors and the prostitutes. And the reason why the kingdom of God is passing them by is because they're confident of their 'inside' status based on their own righteousness. And in their hearts there's not a longing to see the tax collector and prostitute and other sinners get the Good News because they're the ones contrasting themselves with that; they like the fact that there's an us/them mindset; that there's a group that is slotted for vengeance and it's not them. And the kingdom of God passes by those who are self-confident in their 'inside' status and Jesus is saying that it's toward those who are just sure that they're on the 'outside' status. Why? Because the tax collector and the prostitute are not looking down on anybody, they're not judging anybody. When you're on the bottom, you can only look up, and these folks are on the bottom of the social strata of the prioritized sin list, so they're not looking down on anybody, and they know that they need God. Whereas, the Pharisee, then and now, is sort of like a person who's had a seven-course meal and then someone comes along and offers them a dinner; they're already full; they can't fit anything else in. They don't know that they need a physician because they think they're perfectly healthy. Jesus is saying that to be in that position is to be in a scary position. But to be in the position where you know of your desperate need for God to have mercy on you, that is what the kingdom is all about because you are just hungry and thirsty for the declaration that the slate is wiped clean, and that this is the era of forgiveness and mercy to all who will simply receive it.

Everything in the kingdom is absolutely reversed; those who you think would be on the inside are on the outside and those who you assume are on the outside are on the inside. And nothing illustrates this better than the passage we're reading this morning, Luke 4, and this is why this whole theme comes out. In Luke 4, Jesus goes to his hometown. He's already had a little celebrity status because he's been doing some teaching and preaching and whatever. You would think, wouldn't you, that when he comes to his hometown this would be the greatest celebration. They would put it in their newspapers—HOMETOWN BOY MAKES IT BIG; CARPENTER'S SON TURNS OUT TO BE GOD—one of us, a hometown boy; you would

think there would be a major celebration, he is one of us and, wow, are we blessed. That's what you'd think. But, although he's had success and he's been praised in other places, when he comes home, these people are so sure that they know Jesus, they're so sure; they grew up with Jesus; they're so sure they got Jesus down that they turn out to be the one group that turns against Him, and they get angry and try to throw him off a cliff. And that's a scene that we'll find throughout the gospel, and it's still going on today. The insiders turn out to be the outsiders and the outsiders turn out to be the insiders.

So Jesus is rejected by his hometown and he takes his message and his kingdom out into the highways and the byways. And who is it that ends up following him? Read the gospels; it's the tax collectors and the prostitutes and people like you and me. It's those who know that if God turns out not to be a gracious God, we haven't got a chance.

Let's apply this to our lives in a concrete way now. What does this mean for us? It means this: Good news and warning news. The good news is that if you feel like an outsider sometimes in religious circles, you're probably in a pretty good place. If you sort of feel like you don't fit in with real righteous people, you're probably in a good place. If you're just aware that if God turns out not to be merciful and you're a goner, you're in a very good place. If you hunger and thirst for a righteousness that's not your own because you realize you don't have a righteousness of your own, you're in a very good place. If you find that you just don't win at the religion game, you're in a really good place. If you're amazed—as we sang earlier—if you're amazed that God loves you and you begin to see that He died for you while you were yet His enemy, if that is a reality, you're in a very good place. And having tasted a little bit of this love, if your heart is to have every person on this planet, with no exceptions, receive this love, you're in a very good place. The kingdom comes to you; the kingdom is directed towards outsiders; you're in a very good place. If the world has trampled on you, and you've been pushed out and marginalized, from a kingdom perspective, that, actually, is a fortunate thing; you're in a good place because now you're losing at the world's games, and you're hungry for something else.

Now, the challenge for you may be this: Are you willing to give up your outsider status to let God make you an insider? Because we can get addicted to our outsider status; isn't that true? You're so used to thinking about yourself as a victim; you're always the one that the world is never fair to you, the world always walks on you, nothing ever goes right for you, you're always the loser, you're the person who just can't, you just can't, accept the fact that God loves you, and you can, actually, make that your shtick; that can become a source of life for you. This is the one thing that you've got distinctive about you, and it's also kind of convenient sometimes because if you're always the victim and there's always somebody else to blame, then if your life is turning out pretty pathetic, then you've got someone to blame for it; you don't have to take responsibility for it. And it can become a source of identity for you. And it's understandable that you're that way, but it's also unfortunate that you're that way. Here's the good news for you, but it's a challenge; are you willing to let go of that victimization status? Are you willing to let go of that victimization, oh, poor-me mindset in order to begin to walk like a king; in order to begin to walk as the person that God created you to be? Are you willing to accept that God loves you even if the neurons in your brain tend to resist that? Are you willing to allow God to have more credibility to you than your own brain? Are you willing to take it on faith that you, yes, you, in spite of all you have done, all the

heinous things that have gone on in your past, that you, yes, you, are accepted by God, you're loved by God, Jesus died for you, are you willing to accept that? Because, to do that, you've got to lose that I'm-not-loveable thing. That had its day, but you've got to lose that. And I'll tell you this, here's the good news, if you'll just lose that I'm-not-loveable thing and start letting God love you despite all that you've done, you let God in, and I'm telling you it won't be long before you won't be walking in that poor-me mindset anymore. You're not going to be walking as Mr. or Mrs. Victim and how 'the world's always unfair to me' and 'I'm always the outsider' thing. You let God's love in and you let God's power in and you let God's truth in—just a little bit—and you'll find that before long you'll realize that 'in Christ' you're no one's victim; you're not another human's victim, you're not Satan's victim, you're a child of God; you're victorious, you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you (Phil. 4:13). You lose that 'I'm the loser of the world' mindset and you realize that you're a child of the king and you've inherited the kingdom. But to get that, to grow in that, you've got to let go of that false, pathetic way of getting life—just let it go, quit blaming and start walking in the identity that Jesus died for you to be able to walk in. That's your challenge; it's Good News!

The second thing is that it's also a warning. And here's the warning, and it's to some of us here. And Holy Spirit open up our hearts so we can see ourselves accurately. The warning is this: If you're a person who gets life from believing that you're an insider as opposed to those outsiders, that's kind of a dangerous thought; it's a dangerous spot. If you're confident that you're inside as opposed to an outsider because of your behavior and because you're not like those other sinners, that's a very dangerous spot. If you or any part of you believes that you need God's grace less than somebody else, that you needed God's mercy less than somebody else, you're in a dangerous spot. If you find yourself sort of habitually looking down on others and contrasting yourself with others and you're very sure that their sins are tree trunks and yours is a mere dust particle, you're in a dangerous spot; you need to reverse that; make your sins the tree trunk and their sins the dust particle. If you find any part of you wishing, wanting God's vengeance on some—and you may call it righteous indignation—check that, because a lot of what we call righteous indignation is, really, this vengeance stuff I'm talking about. It's the insider/outsider warfare kind of stuff. There is a part of you that just wants them to get their due because you had to sacrifice so much to live for God and they haven't, and there's a part of you that just wants fairness and it's only fair that they get judged while you get blessed. If that's going on in any level of your being, check that, because that's a dangerous sentiment. You're in a dangerous spot if there's any part of you that feeds off of contrasting with others and you get life from the rightness of your beliefs and the rightness of your behavior as opposed to all those who have the wrong beliefs and the wrong behavior. You're in a dangerous spot and the challenge for you as the Bible says over and over again is to humble yourself. As the victimized person needs to let go of the victim mindset, you need to let go of that self-righteous religious mindset. And yours is probably the harder thing to do because your source of life is contrasting yourself with others. Humble yourself. The only safe place to be, vis-a-vis our relationship with God, and if you're here it's totally safe, but here's the safe place; the safe place is to make yourself as low as you can possibly make yourself. Put yourself on the bottom so there's no one to look down on. Identify with the tax collector and the prostitute and yes, the drug-dealing pedophile. You are in that spot! Society and other things may grade your sin a whole lot less than their sin—got that—and society needs to do that. But you need to

understand that from a kingdom mindset—looking at this through kingdom spectacles, your sin would separate you from God as much as their sin. That’s the equalizing thing I’m talking about. And you might as well come off you’re mighty high horse and join the rest of us sinners down here at the bottom, because that’s what’s really going on. Humble yourself before the Lord. Humble yourself before the Lord.

There’s one other dangerous thought and that is this: If there’s a part of you that contrasts yourself with the Pharisees—‘Well, at least I’m not getting life from being a Pharisee’—that’s also a dangerous spot. Look, we’re all caught one way or another, aren’t we? That’s why we all need God’s mercy. Could you get me an anti-Pharisee Pharisee? Those Pharisees, at least I don’t have that sin. There you go. You’re contrasting yourself. God’s vengeance is going to come on those Pharisees. I can’t wait! Now you’re a Pharisee, you’re right in the same boat. Humble yourself before the Lord.

Commit to having this mindset. One of the last words Jesus prayed, it’s so incredible: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” It’s talking about everybody, folks, because we all crucified Him. “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” May this olly-olly in-free, Year of Jubilee be on everybody. That’s the kingdom heart. Even on my enemy. Even on the ones right now who are pounding the nails into my hand. Jesus said, “As you forgive so you are forgiven.” We’re to reflect to all other people what we’ve received; that’s our kingdom mindset. And when we do that, it collapses any form of life of us versus them; it collapses the vengeance clause. God will take care of that, don’t worry. He’ll take care of that; and there might be some surprises when that happens. Our job right here in this era is to receive this crazy, wild, outrageous, and beautiful olly-olly in-free grace and then to extend it to all people at all times with every thought, every word, and with every deed of our life. That, folks, is the dome in which God is King and its beautiful.

Close your eyes. The question I’ll end with is this:

Holy Spirit, will you just tell us what we need to know? If you are here this morning, and you are addicted to some degree to the victim mindset, the poor-me mindset, ‘I’m not loveable,’ How long are you going to go on with that? If you are willing to lose the victim, “I’m not lovable, poor me, world’s not fair” mindset in order to embrace your identity in Christ and embrace the Good News, and this is an act of faith, not what you’re feeling, because your brain may feel that you’re not lovable. Okay, fine, that’s how your dysfunctional brain thinks. But take God at his word. If you want to take God at his word that he loves you, despite—now fill in the blank— before God, if you want to walk in this new identity, just symbolize it by raising your hand. Every eye closed. Okay. I’m going to walk in that new identity. I want to lose that old self. Anybody else? That’s good. That’s good. Okay. Put down your hands. Holy Spirit, tell us what we need to know. If you’re here this morning and, be honest with yourself because there’s no point in lying, some part of you feeds off the contrast, some part of you likes the vengeance clause, some part of you looks down on others and, while you may not be perfect, at least you’re not like that person or this group of persons. If any part of you has a scapegoat group that you get life from, you feel righteous over and against, you need to lose that and humble yourself. And, if you’re willing to confess, and this is not about whether you’re saved or not, this is about getting our minds to line up with truth. If you will lose that and you want to commit to making yourself as low

as possible, and now entering into this same level and identification with that scapegoat group or whoever it is you think is lower than you, I want you to symbolize that before God by raising your hand. You want to humble yourself before the Lord and lose that overconfidence in your own righteousness. Amen.

Beautiful. Beautiful. And now, just pray with me.

Holy Spirit, I first pray for the group who has inherited and is associated with a victim mindset, an 'I'm not loveable' mindset, Lord, you came to set the captives free, set them free right here and right now, break the chain right here and right now, loosen them from that bondage right here and right now, cause them, Lord God, to see themselves as they truly are, Lord God. Holy Spirit, will you just fight your way into their heart of hearts and communicate in a way that they can understand the truth of the gospel; that they don't need to be walking in that mindset any longer. Show them how empty and futile it is to be deriving any sort of distinctiveness or worthwhileness by living in that victim mindset and show them the beauty of walking as a child of God who is nobody's victim, who is nobody's doormat, who knows their worth in Jesus Christ. Reveal it to them and let them let go of the past and embrace the new. And, Lord, for the second group—many of us are in this group—tell us what we need to know. I pray, Lord God, that you would teach us how, in our thoughts and words, to be humble. Help us, Lord God, to see all other sin as a mere dust particle as compared to our sin which is a tree trunk. Create in us the sentiment of the Apostle Paul who said he was the chiefest of sinners. And not that we condemn ourselves, because we know we're justified in Jesus Christ, but we also don't look down on any. Lord God, free us from the bondage. For these folks who raised their hand, this is also a bondage. You came to set the captives free; set them free from the bondage of judgment, the bondage of religion, the bondage of self-righteousness, that false source of life; set them free from that demonic idol and liberate them to live in the freedom of the ollie, ollie, in-free kingdom and to wish for every person on this planet including their worst enemy, including our national enemies, to let our wish for them be "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." And have this desire to see all not receive vengeance but receive the Year of Jubilee. Let it be done. This is your Kingdom. This is your Kingdom, and we give you the praise. In Jesus' name, and all God's people said, Amen! Seal the truth in your mind. Amen.

