

The Upside-Down Kingdom

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One of my all-time favorite TV shows was the comedy, “Parks and Rec” – any other Parks and Rec fans, here? In one of the funnier scenes, Tom Haverford is live tweeting his drive into work. One of his tweets, “4 green lights in a row, hashtag “blessed.”” The live tweeting ends, not surprisingly, when he has a wreck by running into a fire hydrant. It’s a funny scene and it’s meant to, in a good natured way, poke fun at those who claim that minor lucky conveniences are evidence of blessings.

While, I think most people who, like Tom, use the #blessed, are mostly doing it in fun and don’t really believe that God somehow ordained that they make four green lights in a row, I do think that trend came out of our culture’s take on blessing. There are plenty of people who do what I do – pastors – who claim that material success is a sign of God’s blessing. While most of us don’t subscribe to that theology, I think we do tend to think that people get what they deserve, or at least they should. That belief, in a nutshell, is what we call the American Dream – not necessarily that God rewards you but rather if you do what you’re supposed to do, if you work hard, then things are going to work out for you in a good way.

And to be honest, that’s good advice, especially for young people. We should teach our kids that hard work pays off, that doing things the right way gives you a better chance at success. But there’s also a danger in this philosophy as well and that is it can equate success with righteousness or blessing. When that happens, it’s easy to start blaming poor people for their poverty, abused people for their abuse, and so on. And that becomes especially harmful when it’s backed up by theology – this idea that your success or lack thereof is evidence of God’s blessing or God’s punishment on your life.

And that dangerous theology, in all its forms, has been around, I imagine, for as long as people have been thinking about the divine. It certainly was the dominant theology of Jesus’ day where those who were sick, or poor, or disabled were believed to be in that condition because they or their parents had sinned. In other words, it was their own fault. But on the other hand, those who were well, those who were wealthy, were believed to be in that condition because God was rewarding them for their righteousness. They were blessed.

But then Jesus comes around and turns that whole theology upside down. It’s not the rich who are blessed but the poor, the hungry, the grieving. And the wealthy, well they are the ones who are in trouble. Jesus’ statements on blessing may sound familiar to you but I’m guessing that you’re far more familiar with Matthew’s version of this teaching where Jesus doesn’t say, “Blessed are the poor,” but rather “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and so on. I’ve heard far more sermons, been to far more Bible studies on Matthew’s version than Luke’s. And it’s easy to understand why. I, and most of the people in the church I grew up in, most of the pastors I’ve had were not poor so the more spiritualized message of “poor in spirit” is both more relatable and less challenging.

And I'm certainly not alone in that. In fact, it seems like the early Christian community also was a little troubled by Luke's version. The consensus among New Testament scholars is that Luke's version was written earlier than Matthew's and is likely more accurate in terms of what Jesus actually said. But even a few years after Jesus' death, some of the early Christians were trying to tone down how radical some of his statements – especially about wealth and poverty. And one way to do that – to tone them down – was to spiritualize them. So instead of "Blessed are the poor," in Matthew, we have "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and so on. And there's nothing wrong with recognizing that faith often has a spiritual rather than physical dimension. I think Jesus certainly would approve of the statement, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," in the abstract. The problem, though, is when you only spiritualize Jesus' gospel and ignore the very tangible, real world aspects. Alan Culpepper in his Commentary on the Gospel of Luke writes, "Spiritualizing the beatitudes grants those who are not poor access to them, but it also domesticates Jesus' scandalous gospel."

Friends, there is no way around the fact that the gospel of Jesus is a stinging critique of the conventional wisdom that people get what they deserve. The gospel of Jesus rather than blessing our wealth and prosperity instead offers a stark warning for us – wealth is very dangerous. This is a very hard teaching for those of us who are wealthy if we are to take what Jesus says seriously. And notice, I said, "those of us who are wealthy," meaning that I'm counting myself and my guess many of you in that group.

And I know you may be thinking, "Well, I don't feel wealthy."

I certainly don't.

So let me give you a little information that will help us locate ourselves.

If you own a car, you're in the top 1% of people in the world.

The same if you own a computer.

In fact, there's a website called "How Rich Am I?" and you can enter your income and family size and it will tell you in what percentage of people in the world you're located in terms of your wealth – I'm in the top 1.8%. Now I know that's not a completely accurate measure of our wealth as how much income you need varies widely from place to place based on cost of living and local culture and custom and I also know it's not an exact comparison to take Jesus' teachings on wealth in the agrarian economy of 1st century Palestine and apply them to the global economy we find ourselves in today. But it does give us an idea that most all of us, compared to everyone throughout the world, would have been considered wealthy in the material sense. And if we are going to take Jesus seriously, then we do have to wrestle with what he had to say about wealth and possessions and that's not easy. In fact, for me, his teachings on wealth are the hardest of everything he said. Jesus would go on to say that it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Ok...deep breath.

As I said, this is a hard word.

What do we do with this as people of means? I think we need to dig a little deeper into why Jesus believes that riches pose a real danger to humans. I don't believe he's romanticizing poverty nor is he blanketly condemning wealth. Jesus himself loved to go to parties and share meals on someone else's dime. Rather, I think the danger Jesus warns us of is when the pursuit of wealth and possessions shuts us off from God and from those around us, especially those in need. Jesus shared two stories that I think helpfully illustrate this point.

First, Jesus told the parable of the rich fool who had everything he needed and more but decided it wasn't enough, so he tore down his barns to build new ones. In the story, God calls him a fool saying that, "This very night, the man will die and then what will become of all his stuff." The point is that striving to get more when we already have everything we could possibly need or want is to completely miss the point of life. We can become so preoccupied with making money, with gaining more wealth that we can fail to respond to God's call on our lives or we can pay more attention to trying to gain wealth than the things that matter most – like loving relationships.

The second story that helps us understand more what Jesus means is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus where the rich man consistently ignored the poor, sick beggar, Lazarus, sitting on his doorstep, a beggar who even wanted to eat the food given to the dogs. Jesus believed that the rich were neglecting the poor at their gate. For Jesus, choosing to ignore the poor had grave consequences as the story ends with the rich man being condemned and Lazarus finding comfort and grace.

For Jesus, when our wealth (or our pursuit of wealth) can become our obsession to the point that it blinds us from recognizing our dependency on God, that it distracts us from the relationships we should cherish, and that it prevents us from using our resources to care for the poor, then wealth is far more of a curse than a blessing. It harms us spiritually and relationally if we don't use it well. On the other hand, Jesus tells us the poor are blessed, something liberation theologians call God's preferential option for the poor. It's important to note that Jesus is not offering a romanticized version of poverty that suggests that more people should be poor because poverty brings virtue. Rather, Jesus is saying that God especially cares for the poor because they suffer so much. The founder of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez says, "God has a preferential option for the poor not because they are necessarily better than others, morally or religiously, but simply because they are poor and living in an inhuman situation that is contrary to God's will."

Another way to think about blessing is that we are blessed not when God rewards something that we have done but rather we are blessed when we get involved in what God is already doing. God is always working to uplift the poor, so we must always be working, using our

resources, our time, our wealth to do the same. In a way, then, we can use our wealth for good and when we use it for good we find out it is not only good for others, but it is good for our own souls. It's how the camel goes through the eye of the needle.

There's one final story that illustrates the hope Jesus sees for wealthy people – the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector and one of the most wealthy people in town, and one of the most hated because he, like most tax collectors of the time, built their wealth on extorting people. When Jesus passed through, he looked at Zacchaeus and invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house for dinner and immediately Zacchaeus responds by saying he would pay back 4 times all those he had exploited and give away ½ of his possessions to the poor. Jesus then says salvation has come to Zacchaeus and his whole family. It was only when Zacchaeus chose to give away a significant part of his wealth could he truly say he was blessed, liberated, and set free.

Notice where the hope for Zacchaeus is ultimately found. It is not in spiritualizing Jesus' teaching. He doesn't say, "I'm going to keep my money. I'm going to keep defrauding people. But that doesn't matter because those aren't spiritual things. I'll go to church. I'll read my Bible. And I'll pray and all we be good."

No, Zacchaeus says he will repay anyone he has defrauded four times. And he will give ½ of all his money to the poor. You see, there was no hope for Zacchaeus in spiritualizing the call of Christ on his life because the effects of oppression, the effects of poverty are so physical. A hungry person literally feels their hunger in their body. A person living in poverty every day faces real challenges from lack of affordable housing, to lack of healthcare, to lack of peace of mind and security every day. There is no spiritualized way to make those things better just like there's no spiritualized way for us to use our wealth and possessions in the way God would have us to use them. We have to use them in ways that make a real, tangible difference in the lives of real people...for their sake...but not just for their sakes.

After Zacchaeus committed to giving his money to the poor, Jesus said, "Today, salvation has come to his house." I don't think Jesus means salvation in the sense that Zacchaeus was all of a sudden going to go to heaven instead of hell. Rather, I think Jesus meant salvation in the sense that Zacchaeus had finally realized what was important in life. He was finally liberated, set free from pursuing more and more wealth just for himself. He was set free from the need to defraud and oppress others. And in being set free, he found life as it was meant to be lived. He found his own blessing.

Friends, that's the upside down kingdom that Jesus offers us – that so often the things we believe we have to have for life to matter – more money, more possessions, a nicer car, a nicer house – often, not only, don't give us life but, if we're not careful, can actually blind us from the things that do give life. We can create our own state of woe. But when we begin to see the world as God sees it, when we remember that God has a preferential option for the poor and asks us to do all we can to make their lives a little better, when we recognize that the quality of our life is about the loving relationships we have rather than the size of our stock portfolio,

then we truly start to live. You might even say that if we can reach that place, when we are set free from the need to acquire more and more for ourselves, then you just might be able to say that then, we too are blessed.

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