

# The Upside-Down, Inside-Out Kingdom

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Text: Matt 19:16-20:16

I've been seeing a lot of short videos lately in which Muslims question the deity of Jesus Christ. "Show me," they say, "where Jesus says, 'I am God, worship me.'" This is a logical fallacy, the exact word fallacy, where the exact sequence of words must appear for something to be true. The fact is, that exact sequence of words does not appear in the Scripture. Jesus never overtly said, "I am God." But even if he had, it would logically follow that one would worship him. However, Jesus did identify himself as God in many other ways, which I have already given you in a previous message. He used God's name to identify himself

They will also argue that Jesus never called himself the son of God. Nine times in Matthew, Jesus is called the son of God – always by others. Likewise four times in Mark, six times in Luke, and five times in John – always by others. Only once in John does Jesus refer to himself as the son of God – John 10:36, where Jesus asks, "Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'?" The answer is that Adam was called a son of God, as was Abraham and others. Israel itself was called "the children of God." And John 1:12 offers that status to whoever believes in Jesus. Being a son of God, or child of God, does not confer deity on us, or on anyone. However, Jesus did refer to himself as the Son of Man - 29 times in Matthew, 17 times in Mark, 28 times in Luke and 12 times in John, as when he asked the disciples, "*Who do you say the Son of Man is?*" Even though the prophet Ezekiel was addressed as "son of man" 93 times, Jews of his day would have instantly recognized the reference to Daniel 7:13-14 – "*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*" The Son of Man coming in the clouds, given sovereign power, worshiped by all creation, and given an everlasting, indestructible kingdom. *That* is a claim to deity.

But, they will say, Jesus could not have been God because he learned obedience (Heb 5:8), because he increased in favor with God (Lk 2:52), and because he claimed that only God was good (Mt 19:17), where we are today. Their main difficulty is the question of how Jesus could be both finite in his humanity and simultaneously infinite in his deity. How could he be both God and man at the same time? The answer is that we do not know how; we only know that to be the testimony of Scripture, the disciples, and the Early Church. Following the resurrection the Apostle Thomas fell on his knees proclaiming Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28).

The real problem, not only for them, but also for us, is that we want Jesus to fit into some mold we've constructed around how God should behave, how God should exist, what God should look like, and even what the kingdom of God should look like and how it should function. Our

problem is that Jesus doesn't fit our mold, and the kingdom of God doesn't look at all like the kingdoms of earth. Jesus did not come to Israel fitting all their messianic expectations. He wasn't what they were looking for (he's still not what they are looking for!), nor did he act like they thought the Messiah should act. Worst of all, he inaugurated and described a kingdom not at all what they thought God's kingdom should be. They wanted a Messiah who would restore physical Israel to greatness, establish Israel as God's kingdom, and usher in the Golden Age with Israel at the head of the nations. Instead, Jesus' kingdom is an upside-down, inside out sort of kingdom. That's what he tells us in our text today.

**Rich is not what you have, but what you give.** A man comes to Jesus. He asks how one may have eternal life. Quick note: the Greek word for eternal has only peripherally to do with time. It does not translate "forever." Rather it is a life that is timeless, and reflects rather a quality of life rather than length of life. Jesus answer removes the "eternal" part – "If you want to enter life ...". That is, if you want to really live, if you want the kingdom quality of life, here's what you must do.

*"Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"* The presupposition is that we may earn eternal life by the good things that we do and by the bad things we avoid doing. That is, eternal life is something we earn.

Here's where Muslims and others get it wrong. This man asks Jesus, "What good thing ...?" and Jesus answers, *"Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good."* Yes, Jesus is likely referring to the Father, to God, who alone is righteous. But did he say he was not good? No, he did not. He is not claiming that he is a sinner, nor is he disclaiming his own deity. His statement, in fact, is irrelevant in that argument. If Jesus is God incarnate, then he is the One who is good. Jesus is not, in fact, claiming here that he is God, only that God is good.

*"If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."* We learn here that this man is a righteous man, a law-abiding, Torah-keeping Jew. He know all 613 laws and he follows them faithfully. But all of his law-keeping does not satisfy him or assure him of life. *"All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"*

*"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."* Jesus said it in the great sermon – *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Mt 6:19-21). Jesus calls us to set our eyes, set our hearts on heaven, on following him. True riches are in the kingdom of God, not in the kingdoms of man. True riches are found in following Jesus, not in following the patterns of this world.

I don't have time for a full discussion of this part: Jesus, watching the man walk away, remarks on the difficulty of the wealthy to enter the kingdom. *"Easier for a camel to traverse the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom."* Jesus is being literal here. There is no "Needle's Eye Gate" where camels have to be unburdened and pass on their knees. That's an impossibility, because camels can't walk on their knees. The gate doesn't exist and camels can't do that anyway. Jesus is talking about threading a camel through a seamstress's needle. He's not saying that it is difficult, but that it is impossible. If your heart is tied up in your worldly wealth, you

don't have the interests of the kingdom at heart. Your eye must be single and focused (Mt 6:22-23). No one can serve two masters (Mt 6:24).

The disciples express surprise – if the rich can't be saved how can anyone? It requires a change of mindset. We do not save ourselves. We are not saved by our good deeds, good attitudes, good beliefs, or good intentions. Salvation is the work of God. We are saved by His grace, accepted by our faith. We accept the gift the Father has given in Jesus.

They're still confused: *"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"* It's not the leaving that gets us into the kingdom; it's the following. The focus is always Jesus. It's not what we have given up or what we have lost or what we have left behind. It's the fixing our eyes on Jesus, who is the alpha and omega of our faith, the author and the completer, the first and the last. And here's another upside-down, inside out: What we give up here, we gain in the kingdom. Earth's losers are heaven's winners. To Peter and the others with him, Jesus responds, *"Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."* (See Rev 4:4) *"And everyone who has left houses [or family or lands] for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."* What you give in this life, what you lose in this life, will be returned in the next.

*"Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."* It makes no sense to us, as deeply immersed in the matters and mindset of the world as we are. We are ambitious. We want to rise to the top, to advance, to gain. We strive to lead, to have power, to be famous and popular. And Jesus' kingdom doesn't seem fair to us. We strive, work hard, rise through the ranks, only to be sent to the back of the line? How is that fair?

**The kingdom of God is all about God.** It's not about us. God's ways are higher than our ways, God told Isaiah (55:9) – *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."* It's a kingdom based on grace.

Jesus gives them a kingdom parable – *"The kingdom of heaven is like this:"*

A landowner needs workers for his field. Early in the morning, he goes down to the street-corner where the day laborers hang out. He hires them for the standard day's wage - one denarius. A couple hours later, he realizes he needs more help, so he goes back to the street-corner, and hires a bunch more – telling them he will pay them "what is right." He does the same at mid-day and again at mid-afternoon, hiring new crew. Near the end of the day, the work is still not done. Farmers work dark to dark. He goes back to the street and sees day-laborers who have not been hired. On the spot, he hires them, too. Finally, at day's end, it's time to pay up and send the workers home. Those hired at five line up to receive their pay - one denarius each. Those hired at three each got one denarius, as did those hired at noon. The grumbling begins as those hired at nine in the morning line up for their pay, and receive a measly one denarius. And those who were hired first complain loudly about the unfairness of it all, when they have labored all day in the hot sun and are paid no more than those hired in the late afternoon. "We worked all day. They worked a couple hours. We endured the sun and the bulk of the work. Now you pay them the same as us?" The union goes on strike. "We want more. We want more. We want more." And the union boss

confronts the landowner.

*“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.’”* This is what you agreed to. I am paying you a fair wage. *“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my money? Are you envious because I am generous?”*

I see two things here, and there are probably more. But these two:

A denarius was a day’s wage, but barely enough to survive on. No one was going to get rich doing day labor. It would buy enough grain and oil to make bread, maybe enough left to buy salt and a bit of produce. If one were frugal, it might buy a bit of cloth or thread to help make clothing for the family. But regardless of when they started or how hard they worked, the Farmer knew that their needs were the same. Their children needed to eat and have clothing. Having no work meant having no food. It tells me that the Farmer – who represents God – knows our needs. He cares enough to provide for us, just as Jesus had earlier reminded us that just as God feeds the sparrow and clothes the lilies, so he cares for us. In God’s kingdom, we do our best and God provides the rest.

Second, **the kingdom operates on the basis of grace**, not on the basis of how hard we may work. It may seem unfair. In fact, I have often complained that young pastors with no experience seem to have large and growing churches. For some, their very first ministry is a medium to large church. At the same time, there are many of us who have worked our whole lives in small churches showing little success in terms of the numbers. But success is not measured in numbers. In the kingdom, success is measured by faithfulness. Our success comes in following and obeying Jesus. Faithful wins. It’s not about who is fastest, who is brightest, who is most charismatic, or even who works hardest. In God’s kingdom, it’s about faithful following.

There is a third thing, implied at least by the parable. In God’s kingdom, we may not see results right away. Things may not happen the way we want them to. We may look around and ask, as Jeremiah did, *“Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?”* (Jer. 12:1). Why do the wicked prosper while God’s people struggle? The answer is that it all is sorted out in the end. We won’t see the results until “the end of the day.” The first in this life will be last in the next, and the last in this life will go first in the next. This is not some “pie in the sky in the sweet by and by” pabulum. It is the hard truth and faithful promise of God. Earthly riches do not gain heavenly blessing.

God still takes care of his own, and when we are on the verge of giving up, remember: In God’s kingdom, it’s about faithful following. Set your eyes on Jesus. Pin your hopes on Jesus. And then stand firm.