

GETTING AHEAD IN GOD'S UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

Good morning. Let us pray.

God, our Refuge, I ask that your Holy Spirit would move in our lives

- So that we would promote your **justice**
- So that we would embody your **steadfast faithful love**
- and so that we would **humbly** obey Your will,
- even if it costs us our *reputations*,
- and even if it costs us our *lives*.

I ask that this transformation would begin with me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I'd like to start off with a very basic question:

Do you want to get ahead in life?

Do you want things to get better?

Do you want your life, and your children's lives, to improve?

I mean, despite the many things that divide us humans, don't we all want progress?

When it comes right down to it, don't we all just want to get ahead?

I know I do.

In fact, as the students in our youth group could tell you, this is one of the reasons why I love "life hacks"!

Have you heard of life hacks?

They're these little tips and tricks to get ahead in life while saving time, money, and effort.

Like, one of my favorite life hacks is the "coffee nap."

You drink a cup of coffee, then immediately take a 20-minute nap, so that the caffeine kicks in right as you wake up.

Life hack. Try it sometime. Thank me later.

ANYWAYS, we all want to get ahead in life. Right?

But there's a problem.

How do we know what *getting ahead* looks like?

I mean, think about it. Getting ahead can look quite different in different contexts. Right?

Perhaps this is too crude of an example for a sermon, but getting ahead in a drinking game looks totally different than getting ahead in Alcoholics Anonymous!

Getting ahead in the NBA Finals hopefully looks different than getting ahead in playing basketball with your kids.

Getting ahead on Wall Street as a day-trader hopefully looks different than getting ahead in running a charity.

In order to get ahead,

- you have to know the context,
- you have to know the rules,
- you have to know the goal.

Otherwise, no matter how hard you try, you're not really going to get ahead.

You'll just be getting ahead at the wrong thing. Which means you'll fail.

So here's the kicker: Getting ahead in God's eyes looks a whole lot different than getting ahead in the world's eyes.

The world is a different context.

The world follows different rules.

And the world has a different goal than God's Kingdom.

In fact, and here's my main point if you want to write it down:

Because God's Kingdom is an "upside-down" Kingdom, getting ahead in the Kingdom of God will frequently look foolish in the eyes of the world.

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Now, this is the message of all of our readings for today, but I'd like to start with the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18. (You can find it on page 952 in your pew Bible.)

1 Corinthians 1:18 says:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing (that's what I'm calling "the world," by the way – those who are perishing), *but to us who are being saved* (that is, to us who are a part of God's Kingdom) *it is the power of God.*

You see, **God's not against getting ahead.**

In fact, you could even say that God is on a mission to “Make Creation Great Again”!

I'm not kidding! He made it great in the first place – a perfect universe with perfect relationships between God, humanity, and all of creation.

However, ever since we humans rebelled against God – ever since Sin shattered the relationships between God, humanity, and all of creation – God has been on a mission to put everything back together again.

Sounds great, right?

So why is Paul saying that the good news of God's rescue mission is *foolishness* to the world?

Because God makes creation great again in a totally unexpected way!

This is what I mean by “God's upside-down kingdom.”

In order to make the world right again, God shows up and **reverses** the ways the world has gotten used to working.

And the greatest reversal of all in God's upside-down kingdom is when **the eternal Son of God becomes human and gets himself killed for the sins of the entire world.**

The world expects

- power,
- might,
- strength,
- and victory,

and we receive instead a

- naked,
- abandoned
- Middle-Eastern man,
- brutally executed
- as a political criminal.

We receive a *bloody example* for those who would dare challenge the kingdoms of this world.

We receive a *Crucified Savior*.

And the world calls that absolutely **RIDICULOUS**.

Because, to the world, you don't get ahead by **laying your life down** (like Jesus did).

You get ahead by taking what's yours.

You don't get ahead by **hanging out with the wrong crowd** (like Jesus did).

You're supposed to rub shoulders with the rich and the famous, not the **poor** and the **homeless**.

You're not supposed to **focus on the people at the bottom and at the border** (like Jesus did)!

For crying out loud, you're supposed to get out there and hustle!

- Climb the ladder!
- Make deals!
- Take no prisoners!
- Make demands!
- Get ahead!

...And get right back where we need to be saved **FROM!**

That's where the world's ways get us.

Where every human is

- an egotistical island,
- competing with God,
- alienating other humans,
- and abusing creation.

Thankfully, as Paul tells us in [**1 Cor 1:25**],

the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God saves us through what looks like foolishness and weakness.

Why? So that we would not boast in our pathetic "wisdom" and "strength."

Instead, we are to boast only in the true wisdom and strength of God.

Paul continues in [**1 Cor. 1:27**]:

- **But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;**

- God chose what is **weak** in the world to shame the **strong**;
- ²⁸ God chose what is **low** and **despised** in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,
- ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

This, then, is the upside-down Kingdom of God. And it's the exact same Kingdom that we find in the Beatitudes of

Matthew 5.

Would you turn to **page 809** in your pew Bible?

(FYI: We call them the "Beatitudes" because of the Latin word for "blessed/happy" – *beatus*.)

Now, remember.

God isn't against getting ahead.

He really does want what's best for us.

But the danger is that we'll try to get ahead on our own, in our own way.

And if we do that, **we'll miss the point in at least two ways.**

First, we won't realize that **we desperately need a Savior**, and that **we cannot save ourselves**.

Second, we will **ignore** the very **people** that God wants us to **care for** in order to really get ahead in his Kingdom!

That is, **on our own**, we're going to focus on those at the **center** and **height** of **power**. You know, "The Winners."

But **God focuses** on those at the **bottom** and at the **borders**, the **edges** of society. You know, "The Losers."

These are the people who will experience God's favor in his Upside-Down Kingdom. Take a look at [**Matthew 5:3-12**].

Notice how Jesus declares God's favor, His blessing, to what the world would call the "wrong kind of people."

- To the **poor** in spirit
- Those who **mourn**
- The **meek**
- Those who **hunger** and thirst for righteousness
- The **merciful**
- The **pure** in heart

- The **peacemakers**
- The **persecuted**
- And the **reviled**

And notice as well, that the blessings frequently involve **reversals**.

The world is giving them one thing, but God is going to give them another.

Now, this is important: these famous words are a **mixture** of **encouragement** and **instruction**. That is, Jesus isn't just giving us a TO-DO LIST in order to get as much blessing as possible.

He's not saying "Go out there and try harder to be poor, persecuted, hungry, mourners."

Now, Jesus IS **instructing**, more on that in a second. **But** he is first offering divine **encouragement** to those who are **already** in those situations.

Here's my interpretive translation of the Beatitudes. Follow along with each one if you've got a Bible in front of you.

Jesus is saying:

(1) "Take heart! Things aren't what they seem! If you **lack resources** and realize that God alone can save you, then you might not feel like a part of the Roman kingdom. **But you're a part of God's Kingdom.**"

(2) "Be encouraged! If you **bear** and **grieve** the **sufferings** of the world, then the kings of the world probably won't give you much **comfort**. **But God, your true King, will.**

(3) Take heart! If you **humbly** and **gently refuse** to seek **vengeance** or **power**, then you probably won't inherit much from the world's kingdoms. **But God will give you an inheritance in His Kingdom.**

(4) Be encouraged! If you **pursue God's will above all else**, then you'll probably go **hungry** in this world. But you will be **satisfied** in God's Kingdom, where His **will** is **obeyed**.

(5) Take heart! If you show **mercy** and **compassion** to a suffering world, you might not receive much mercy back! **But you yourselves will be shown mercy by God.**

(6) Be encouraged! If you **single-mindedly** pursue God's will, then you probably won't experience the world's glory. **But you will experience God's glory and presence.**

(7) Take heart! If you **pursue reconciliation** and **reject violence**, then you probably won't reflect the character of this world. **But you will reflect the character of God.**

(8) Take heart! Because when this world **rejects** you, **insults** you, **lies** about you, and **persecutes** you, then it may not look like it, **but you're in good company!**

You're in the company of your Savior, Jesus Christ.

Friends, if you're here today and you're at the bottom of this world, then I **encourage** you to **cling** to the divine **promises** of **blessing** in the Beatitudes.

God is in the process of making all things new – **reversing** every wrong in this world. **Take heart.**

However, and perhaps this is uncomfortable to talk about, **what if we're NOT on this list?**

What if we're NOT

- poor,
- mourning,
- meek,
- hungry,
- merciful,
- pure-hearted,
- peacemakers
- who are persecuted?

What if we're

- reasonably well-educated
- and wealthy,
- comfortable,
- powerful
- American
- Christians?

How should we respond to the Beatitudes?

While I **DON'T** think that the Beatitudes should be read like a **TO-DO list**,

I DO think that the Beatitudes are an instructive challenge to followers of Jesus.

There is a reason why the Beatitudes are at the beginning of Jesus' quintessential sermon.

It's almost like Jesus is saying,
"OK, you want to follow me?"

You want to be a part of my coming Kingdom? Then let's get really clear on **what this Kingdom is going to be like.**

It's not going to be the kind of Kingdom you're used to in this world.

You know, the kind of kingdom where the **wealthy, wise, and powerful** get rewarded.

Instead, in MY Kingdom, **the people who get chewed up and spit out by the kingdoms of this world will be rewarded and honored.**

SO,

- if you want to be a part of my Kingdom,
- if you want to “get ahead” in my Kingdom,
- then **you better show concrete concern for**
 - **the oppressed,**
 - **the marginalized,**
 - **and the weak!**

And, as you do so, you'd better be prepared to end up among the oppressed and the marginalized, because the world is going to think you are out of your minds!”

Brothers and sisters, remember:

Because God's Kingdom is an “upside-down” Kingdom, getting ahead in the Kingdom of God will frequently look foolish in the eyes of the world.

But there is no escape clause from the rules of God's Kingdom!

That is, you can't just ignore Jesus and the Bible because you're SCARED.

- Because you're scared of **how a congregation is going to respond to your sermon,**
- Because you're scared of **looking foolish,**
- Because you're scared of **losing your job,**
- Because you're scared of **a terrorist attack.**

It's not that Jesus doesn't care about your fears. He does.

But let's not kid ourselves!

FEAR is not a valid excuse for ignoring the Bible's repeated commands for God's people to show faithful concern for the kinds of people the world ignores and mistreats!

So, let's get practical here. How should we respond to these passages about God's Upside-Down Kingdom?

We must show concrete concern for the powerless. And two recent issues come to mind, that I would be a coward not to mention.

First, in light of the 44th March for Life held this past weekend, **I'd be remiss if I didn't remind you that we must continue to stand up for the unborn.**

Abortion is a gruesome **evil**. And like other forms of evil, it is complex – not easily eradicated.

As Christians, we must wage war against this evil. And that will involve caring not only for the **unborn child**, but also the **mother**, and the child **after** it is born, and the entire **family**.

Repealing Roe v. Wade isn't going to completely solve the problem.

Christians will have to step up to the plate and be **consistently pro-life** in order to fix things.

If you're passionate about this issue, I encourage you to check out the organization **Anglicans for Life** at **AnglicansForLife.Org**.

So, first, we must stand up for the unborn.

Second, given President Trump's recent executive actions to halt the acceptance of all refugees to the USA, including a temporary moratorium on seven predominantly Muslim countries,

I'd be remiss if I didn't remind you that, if we are to be consistently pro-life, we must also stand up for the refugees.

Next to the unborn, refugees around the world – but especially from Syria – are among the most **vulnerable** and **powerless** people in the world.

Christians should be standing up for and supporting these people. And, to their credit, many Christians are doing so.

I'd encourage you to check out the great work being done by organizations like **World Relief** and **We Welcome Refugees**. Talk to me after the service if you'd like more ideas and reading recommendations, by the way.

However, many Christians in this country are **falling prey to the fear excuse**.

We're being tempted to turn away these vulnerable people because of the **supposed risk of a terrorist attack**.

****I'm here this morning to plead with you: Do not fall prey to this nonsense.****

Even if the fear were *legitimate*, it is no **excuse** for Christians not to show concrete love to the powerless.

Whoever said that following Jesus would not involve any risks?

We dare not worship the *American gods* of **comfort** and **security** while neglecting to follow the True God's commands.

However, **these fears of refugees are VASTLY overblown.**

According to a September 2016 **Policy Analysis** from the **CATO** institute,

- “the chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack caused by a **refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year.**”
- The chance of being murdered in a terrorist attack committed by an **asylum-seeker is 1 in 2.73 billion per year.**
- And “the chance of being murdered in an attack committed by an **illegal immigrant is an astronomical 1 in 10.9 billion per year.**”

For comparison: according to the National Safety Council, **your chance of dying from a lightning strike is 1 in 174,426.**

****That means it's about 20,868 times more likely that you will get killed by lightning than by a refugee terrorist attack.****

While we're worried about astronomical odds, these people are dying. The death toll from the Syrian conflict is approaching half a million, including 50 thousand children.

Brothers and sisters, please don't mishear me. I'm not saying that the USA shouldn't change anything about its policies. Surely there are many problems which need fixed.

However, I beg you: please do not fall prey to the fear-mongering. Please think and reason as **Christians** first.

After all, you can only give your “total allegiance” to one thing.

Jesus Christ will not settle for second place to the United States.

So, stand up for the unborn and the refugees, not to mention the countless other marginalized, oppressed, and powerless people around us.

And I don't even have time to get into how Christians should be concerned for religious liberties for all faiths. That's a whole other sermon...

Because God’s Kingdom is an “upside-down” Kingdom, getting ahead in the Kingdom of God will frequently look foolish in the eyes of the world.

But, if our Gospel is true, then we of all people should be willing to put our lives and our reputations at risk for the sake of others – especially for the poor and the needy.

So, again, God, our Refuge, I ask that your Holy Spirit would transform us from the inside out

- So that we would promote your **justice**
- So that we would embody your **steadfast faithful love**
- and so that we would **humbly** obey Your will,
- even if it costs us our *reputations*,
- and even if it costs us our *lives*.

I ask that this transformation would begin with me, and that it would extend to the ends of the earth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.