

## **THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM: Where the Last Are First**

**Mark 10:17-31**

**October 13, 2024**

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**WATGH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-upside-down-kingdom-where-the-last-are-first](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-upside-down-kingdom-where-the-last-are-first)**

I.

Last Sunday was a wonderful Sunday here at First Baptist Church. As part of our worship service, we presented the first memorial scholarship in memory of our late pastor, Dr. Doyle Sager. His family established the fund through our church to honor Dr. Sager's memory and legacy as a mentor to many younger ministers throughout his career.

Doyle's family was present when we presented the first scholarship to Marcos Rodriguez. Marcos, a Cuban national, is the son of a pastor who is also the former president of the Eastern Baptist Convention of Cuba.

Marcos is finishing his senior year at Southwest Baptist University and will graduate with a marketing and international business degree in May. He plans to assist Cuban congregations and Christ-followers in becoming better stewards of their resources for the glory of God and the good of the world. It was our honor to award Marcos the first Doyle Sager Memorial Scholarship. As a church, we've also financially supported Marcos through our Missions budget for the past four years, and early this year, we gave a one-time financial gift to The Baptist Home in Cuba, a home for the aged. Our connection with Marcos and Cuba is a testament to our shared mission, the mission heart of this congregation, and the unity of the global Christian community.

After the service last Sunday, we held a small reception for Marcos and the Sager family so they could share stories and ask questions. We shared about Doyle and how much he would have loved and encouraged Marcos. Marcos shared about life in Cuba and the hopes and challenges of believers there.

We learned that Cuban churches are packed each Sunday, often with members standing in aisles or along the walls. Part of this is that former Cuban president Fidel Castro made it illegal to build new churches decades ago, so there are not enough church buildings. In recent years, the country has been experiencing a great revival, planting new churches and sending missionaries out to lead in homes and wherever they can gather. Space is one of their greatest challenges. So is money.

Marcos's dad, Josue (Hoos Way), and another Cuban pastor, Joey, visited Jefferson City in 2017. They preached at our Hispanic church, FCI. They also sat down for an interview with Word & Way magazine. Joey shared that, along with space challenges, they don't know how to support the multiple church plants and missionaries they send out, many with families. Joey was a missionary himself and knew what it meant to try to live on \$5 a month. \$5 a month.<sup>1</sup>

When we gathered in the Fellowship Hall last Sunday, someone asked Marcos why there were crowds in Cuban churches that we rarely see here. His kind and honest response was that maybe it is because they are poor and dependent on God for everything, whereas here, we can feel like we can do things on our own.

Pastor Joey from Cuba confirmed this when responding to that interview in 2017. He was asked what he would like Baptists in the United States to know about life in Cuba, and this was his response. "I hope that my Baptist brethren in the U.S. will know that the scarcity that we confront in Cuba has made us very strong. What appears to be a weak point is something that God has used to expand the church. The less we have, the more we look and seek after God... God's working powerfully in our community. Our church is outwardly focused. We're offering courses of English free to the community. We're working with addicts in the community to help them recover. We're working with children — both Christian and non-Christian — of our community to help. We're helping to transform the community. And we're trying to live the gospel that we preach. It's difficult, but we are doing it. And people are looking at church as if it were an oasis."

"The less we have, the more we look and seek after God ...

We're trying to live the gospel that we preach ...

People are looking at church as if it were an oasis – a place of refuge, a place of water for people who thirst.

II.

Last Sunday, we met a young man named Marcos. Today, we meet a young man whose name we don't know. We know this: Mark's Gospel tells us he was rich, Matthew adds he was young, and Luke tells us he was a ruler. A ruler of what we don't know.

But this rich, young ruler has a question for Jesus. "... 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (v. 17)

We don't know the man's motives, but he appears to be a sincere seeker searching for something more. He runs to Jesus and kneels before him.

In his conversation with Jesus, the man tells Jesus he has kept the commandments since his youth. Is that enough? Is there something more to be done? Because it feels like there's something I'm missing.

We might imagine he has talked to the religious leaders and other rabbis or teachers about this ache within that something is missing. He probably got more of the same about the importance of following the rules and staying busy for God. Perhaps he's been to every spiritual retreat offered, volunteered in the nursery, and read every book on ten steps to becoming a better Jew by Monday. And yet ... something is missing. There has to be something more.

So, he takes his shot. He runs to Jesus, kneels before him, and asks: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

"Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (v. 21)

What will this man whom Jesus loves do? The text says he became distressed and went away (the opposite of following), grieving because he had many possessions.” This is the only episode in the gospels where Jesus calls someone to follow him and gets turned down.

But it is not the only time Jesus speaks about money. Jesus speaks most about the kingdom of God. Coming in second? Money.

III.

On Wednesday night, I hosted our college Bible study. It was me and five young men: two members of our church and three members of the Lincoln golf team, whom my nephew invited last year and whom my family has gotten to know. One is American, one is from South Africa, and one is from Zambia. We studied this passage, reading through it three times and pausing to discuss it between each reading. They always have incredible insights and genuine interest in what Jesus is teaching.

One asked me if I thought Jesus was telling me to do this: sell what I own and give to the poor. I talked about how some think Jesus is speaking to this man about the one thing he knows this man loves more than anything and that perhaps Jesus would look intently into our hearts and say something different to each of us. I said, "I don't know that money is that important to me. I think it might be family. If Jesus were to ask me to give up my family, to leave them, I might walk away shocked and grieving like the young man."

But his question stayed with me for the next couple of days, just as I imagine Jesus's answer remained with the rich, young ruler all his days. With every email and ad in my inbox about the latest sale, with every influencer in my feeds hyping the latest viral product or fall décor to solve or distract me from my problems, with every bill that came knew I could pay on my own, and every yes I gave without a need to consider the cost, I realized money had more of a grip on me than I thought.

Countless preachers have told us Jesus perceived wealth as this man’s special “weak spot,” so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man’s unique weakness. I grew up hearing this, and perhaps there is truth to it. But this approach also permits us to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we do not want to give up but know we need to—our aggressive driving, cuss words during a Royals or Chiefs game, or our sweet treats. So, off to TJ Maxx I go, but I'll skip Cold Stone this time as a show of faithfulness and sacrifice to Jesus.

There has to be something more than this, right? I know the world says this is abundant living, but it doesn't feel like the abundant living Jesus offers us.

The more I sat with this young man's question from Wednesday night and our text for today, the more I realized how often we try to nickel and dime the call to follow Jesus. Give enough to the church or charity to tamp down the Christian guilt. Attempt a sleight of hand with the Lord by laying a card down of a lesser struggle while holding the real Ace close to our hearts.

But just like the rich, young ruler and just like the Cuban Baptists, Jesus looks at us intently, loves us deeply, and asks us to let go and follow Him. To trust Him with all that we are and all that we have. We don't get to decide what is on or off the table. The call to follow Jesus is not a negotiation. It is a total and complete surrender. In the upside-down kingdom of Jesus, it is in letting go of everything and grabbing hold of Jesus with everything that we find what we truly seek – abundant, everlasting life now and in the age to come.

Jesus' primary call is a call to a life of discipleship, not poverty. If poverty were the call, we would have read more stories of Jesus telling people to sell all their possessions and give to the poor. But we don't. It is only this once. But if that makes you and I utter a great sigh of relief, well, we've missed the message, and if we listen closely, we'll hear the jingle of nickels and dimes.

#### IV.

If we refuse to tame or explain today's gospel away, it reminds us that there are good, understandable reasons not to follow Jesus. We often teach that Jesus solves all our problems. The reality, as the Rev. Dr. Will Willimon says, is that sometimes Jesus is the start of problems we would never have had if we had not been met by Jesus!

Jesus calls for more than a change in the man's bottom line and the liquidation of his possessions. He calls him to give up his trust in wealth and put it in Jesus. He calls him to let go of his identity as one of the blessed rich and change his relationship with the poor—to help and identify with them. Following Jesus will mean drawing near to them. It is an invitation to get over himself and out of himself, and once he does, he'll find himself inside the kingdom of God. That something he's been missing? This is the way to find it and so much more. It's not that we must grit our teeth as we chalk it all up in the loss column. No, Jesus says the disciples get back a hundred-fold whatever they lost. And he's not just talking about heaven, but right here and now. The joy, peace, and true contentment of following the way of Jesus outweigh any loss we might experience. It's liberating, satisfying, and a life of abundance in the things that matter most.

#### V.

One night, in another college Bible study on a college campus, Will Willimon presented this same story of Jesus and the rich man and asked the gathered students, "What do you make of this story?"

"Had Jesus ever met this man before?" asked one of the students.

"Why do you ask?" Willimon wondered.

"Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky and radical from him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response. In my experience, a professor only demands the best from students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he could really be a disciple."

Willimon was stunned. He'd never thought of it that way.

Another student said thoughtfully, "I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise."

Again, Willimon was astounded. What he had heard as severe, demanding BAD news, these students heard as gracious, GOOD news.<sup>ii</sup>

It reminds me of what Pastor Joey wanted to tell us Baptists in the US: "I hope that my Baptist brethren in the U.S. will know that the scarcity that we confront in Cuba has made us very strong. What appears to be a weak point is something that God has used to expand the church. The less we have, the more we look and seek after God."

Jesus says to us, "Break free! Let go of your stuff! Follow me! Trust me. Find your identity in me. I believe you can do it!" And when you do, you will find yourself inside the abundant life you seek. When we do, we need a community of faithful followers who get

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://wordandway.org/2017/07/21/q-a-interview-with-cuban-baptist-pastors/>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002809/the\\_peril\\_and\\_the\\_promise\\_of\\_being\\_met\\_by\\_jesus](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002809/the_peril_and_the_promise_of_being_met_by_jesus)