

The Upside-Down Kingdom, Part 1

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[0 : 00] It loses its saltiness. How can it be made salty again?! Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them. For truly, I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished.

Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

So the words of the song that we were just singing, the opening of the Lord's Prayer, Father, let your kingdom come. Father, let your will be done. That's a huge thing for us to be asking.

[1 : 48] Not for God, he can do it, but for us. Are we prepared for what that actually means for us? I'm going to start us off in the middle of today's passage, actually.

As Richard just read for us, Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. To most of us, that second bit sounds familiar. In John 8, Jesus says, I am the light of the world. Jesus says, I will light the way through the darkness. Yesterday morning at the prayer meeting and as Sherwin was just leading us in prayers, we've been talking about, we've been seeing how there is so much uncertainty in today's world.

With wars and conflicts going on, with a rise of everything, including things like anti-Semitism in our own country here. With so much, with a complete upheaval in local councils across the country. The cost of living crisis, the climate catastrophe and so much more. We've never lived in a time with so much uncertainty going on around us.

[3 : 03] And Jesus says, I am the light of the world. He says, I am like a lighthouse who will guide you through this darkness to the shore.

But Jesus is saying, here you are the light of the world. Because he's saying, it's not just good enough for me to be the one here telling everyone all of this, guiding people through.

I want you to do it. I want you to guide people through the uncertainty of this world. And I want you to point people to God.

Verses 14 and 16, as Richard just read, you are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp or put it under a bowl.

Instead, they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

[4 : 04] Let your light shine for all the world to see. It's great for us to come to church or come along to a prayer meeting or read the Bible and pray in our own time at home.

But if we do all of that in quiet, Jesus is very clear. He says, that's not enough. I want the whole world to see. I want your life with me to be a light that shines out like a beacon from the top of the hill.

We're called to be seen and to stand out with lives that point to God. As a youth and children's worker, as a godfather and as a recent uncle, I'm constantly asking the question, how can I be that light in today's world?

How can I reflect God to our young people at the moment as they are going through revision and times for exams and all sorts of other stresses? How can I be a light for my life that points my God's son to God, to be dependent on him and to have a life with him?

How can we show a God-given, grace-filled way of living? How can I be a light for my life that points my God's son to be a light for my life?

[5 : 57] It's part in the book. But this book is all about God's kingdom is completely different to the world's. We're called to be a light, not in a world filled with light.

We're called to be in a light filled, in a world filled with people who are lost. Within this book, the author Malcolm Duncan, he is a pastor in Northern Ireland.

He quotes R.L. Schveller, who is a political lecturer at a university or college in America. And in 2014, Schveller wrote this.

The world is undergoing transformation, a chaotic period where most anything can happen and little can be predicted. Where yesterday's rule takers become tomorrow's rule makers, but no one follows rules anymore.

Where competing global visions collide with each other, where remnants of the past, present and future coexist simultaneously. This was written in 2014. This was before Brexit.

[7 : 03] Before the whole... Sorry, mine's just gone blank on the word. But before people speaking out and taking a stand against organised culture and people at the top.

And then it was quoted in this book, written in 2022, just after the pandemic, when everything changed. But isn't it even more the case now?

The world is changing so, so fast. Faster than it ever has before. We don't know whether we'll wake up tomorrow to find out that the Iran war has ended, or to find out there's been more missile strikes. We don't know whether we're going to wake up to find out the cost of petrol has risen by another ten pence, or whether the Strait of Hormuz is open and the cost is going to start to come down. We don't know whether we're going to wake up to find out that in our local areas, some of us with brand new local councillors, things are starting to change, or whether things are continuing to go in the same direction.

It is impossible for us to predict. It's impossible for us to depend on the world around us. But while the world is constantly changing, God does not.

[8 : 26] Jesus says, or God says, yesterday, today, and forever, I am the same.

In a world with more uncertainties, pressures, and stresses on our young people than ever before, how do we point them to Jesus? There isn't a Bible on the lectern for me to hold up, but the answer is in the Bible.

I don't want to hold up this book, but the answer is in the Bible. It's not about having a set of rules to unpick. Actually, Jesus accused the Pharisees time and time again for missing the point and focusing too much on the rules, for treating them like a checklist.

But Jesus also said he didn't come to abolish the law. Doesn't that sound a bit like a contradiction? Verses 17 and 18, So on the one hand, Jesus isn't abolishing the law.

But on the other hand, he's accusing the Pharisees of focusing too much on it. I think it can be really easy to make a mistake there, because the words that we use, we call both of them the law.

[10 : 00] But actually, Jesus is referring to something very different, or at least a little bit different. The Greek word that Jesus uses here, and the majority of the time when he's talking about the law, he uses the word *nomos*, which refers to the Torah as a whole.

All five books at the start of the Bible. Not just the commandments written in the book of Exodus. Not just the additional laws added from there until the end of Deuteronomy.

But the Torah, the law, is a covenant between God and people. And it's not the first one either. Actually, there are seven covenants throughout the Bible that God makes with people.

We start off right at the very beginning of Genesis with the Adamic covenant. I will be with you always. But in return, please look after my creation, and don't try to think you know better than I do. We already know they messed that up. But still, God responded to that with grace and with mercy. The second covenant is just a little bit later in Genesis.

[11 : 14] The Noahic covenant. I will never again turn my wrath on all life on earth. Well, God kept that end of the deal.

But we still miss the mark. We still sin. We still think we know better than God. And then we move on a bit later and we get the Abrahamic covenant.

This is one with a particular people. But it's not meant just for this small group of people. God makes a covenant with Abraham to say, I will give you a nation of descendants.

And through them, the whole world will be blessed and will be brought back to me. That was the covenant that God made.

Not to say, you are the only nation I care about anymore. But to say, you are the nation I have chosen to bring people back to me. But the people didn't keep their end of the deal.

[12:20] As time went on, more and more, they kept that covenant to themselves. And they turned away other people. And then we also get, not long after that, we get what's called the Palestinian covenant.

Where God says, I will give you this amazing land to live in as long as you follow me. And every single time, I stood up here before and I've talked about constant cycles.

I teach the Old Testament in St. Jude's and I talk about the constant cycle. Where things are going great. And then people think, things are going so well, I'm not sure we need God. Let's do it our way.

And then things start going downhill. And then they get invaded and attacked. And they cry out to God saying, God, please help us. We do need you after all. And God helps them.

He sends them a judge or someone else to help. And things gradually get better as they come back to God. Eventually, this goes on so many times that God just lets the Israelites be scattered.

[13:21] And the Judeans be exiled. And now they have to learn to follow God in a completely foreign land. So by the time we reach the Mosaic covenant, we've already been through four.

So this is the Ten Commandments. We know that this is not long after the Israelites, after God's nation had left Egypt where they had been slaves. And they were crying out to God saying, life was better in Egypt when we were slaves.

Well, they were saying to God, well, at least we knew what we had to do. Sure, we were being treated badly. But at least we knew how to act to make things a little bit better. Now we don't know what to do anymore.

And they were looking at every nation around them. Every nation that had a ruler, that had a king. And the people had to subject themselves to that king. And had to follow those rules.

And if they didn't, they would be punished or exiled. The commandments don't come until Exodus. For an entire book of the Bible, they don't have the Ten Commandments.

[14:32] The Mosaic, sorry. Yeah, the Mosaic covenant. Because for that entire book of Genesis, it's simple.

Love God. Love others. Do good. And if you do that, I will always be with you. The Mosaic covenant didn't change that.

It helped them to understand it. So we come to Exodus. God gave the people what they want. A conditional set of laws. And with those conditional laws come punishments for failing them.

But God still showed them grace. He gave them a way out. He said, well, I know you're going to fall short of these laws. So when you, not if you do, when you do, make offerings and sacrifices to cover the cost of that.

That's what your ancestors did throughout Genesis. Every time they knew they had messed up and got it wrong. So that's what I want you to do. So now we fast forward back to Jesus.

[15:42] Jesus said, I have come to fulfill the law. Jesus knew he was going to pay the cost of the Mosaic covenant.

He paid the price so we don't continue to have to. I mentioned there are seven covenants. The sixth one is the Davidic covenant, which is a reinforcing of the Abrahamic.

And the seventh covenant. The new covenant is Jesus. When Jesus spilled his blood to pay the cost for us. That is what Jesus is talking about when he says, I have come to fulfill the law.

Not I have come to make sure you keep following every single one of these rules and never get it wrong. But to say, I know you're going to fall short on your end of the covenant.

So I will pay that price for you. And that is my new covenant with you. It's through Jesus, for once and for all, we can be given an unconditional forgiveness.

[16:51] For breaking that very first covenant. That we all do. Probably every day of our lives. Most of the time without even thinking about it. When we think we know better than God.

So we're at the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount. Jesus saw the crowds and he went up to the mountain. And actually Matthew says it was his disciples who then came to him.

Not just the 12 apostles. But other disciples who had decided they wanted to follow Jesus every day as well. Matthew suggests that the rest of the crowds were around to hear what he said.

But this particular part of the message was for those constant followers of him. You see, this is a message to believers. To followers of Jesus.

It's not a set of rules for us to impose on the world. The Pharisees acted like gatekeepers. They said, follow these rules and make these sacrifices.

[17 : 56] Then you can come to God. Jesus says, no. It's the other way around. Come to me. And then I will show you a better way of living.

I'm going to try and read, if I can do it one-handed, a quote from the book. So this is quoting somebody called Bonhoeffer. Who is a theologian.

He wrote this, I believe it was 2004. And he was actually talking about another Bonhoeffer. Who was a youth worker in the 1930s. A Christian youth worker. Instead of regarding Jesus' sermon in the way that had become traditional for Lutherans.

That is, as a law that condemns us. And so, that condemns us. And so prepares us to receive the gospel of grace. Bonhoeffer came to see the Sermon on the Mount was a charter for life lived by grace.

See, there's nothing in the Sermon on the Mount that actually talks about grace. Certainly not in this beginning bit that I'm talking about today.

[19 : 06] Jesus gives us grace. And he's now saying, we're not saved by following the commands in the Sermon on the Mount. That's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying, I've given you grace.

Or I am giving you grace. Now I'm showing you how to live as a saved person. This is guidance on how to live like that.

On how to be the salt of the earth. And how to be a light in the world. In Matthew 22, which I'm sure we will come to in several weeks.

Jesus sums up the law. We would all recognize this. The most important of the commandments. To love the Lord your God with everything you are. To love others as you love yourself.

Jesus didn't make that up. He quoted Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 5. So God summed up the law all the way back then and said, love God with everything you are.

[20 : 05] And love others as you love yourself. That's what the law is about. That's what every one of the Ten Commandments are about. It's what the Torah is about.

The laws that God gave them, the rules that God gave them, were to help them stand out. To be salt. And to be light in the world. So how do we do that?

Now, it starts here. Not with the rules, but actually with a set of blessings. Shouldn't put that away yet. It starts with the Beatitudes.

Where God says, blessed are those. Blessed are the poor in spirit. That means blessed are those who recognize that we can't get salvation on our own.

But we need God. We need the grace of God. We are spiritually dependent on him. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

[21 : 07] It's through God's grace that we all get the reward with him. Blessed are those who mourn. That's not just talking about bereavement.

Actually, it's talking about recognizing that we've sinned. Talking about recognizing that we fall short, that we miss the mark. And to be convicted about that.

To want to change that. Doesn't mean to feel condemned. Doesn't mean to feel like we're not good enough or we don't deserve God's grace. We're not meant to walk around in shame with our heads down.

In fact, the Bible says that God lifts our heads. Because his grace has meant we're saved. But a part of accepting that grace is to recognize we fall short and we need it.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God won't leave you to wallow in your guilt or shame. But he will lift your head to focus on his offering of grace.

[22 : 10] Blessed are the meek. Doesn't mean blessed are the weak or the quiet. Actually, meek means strength under control. It means strength submitted to God.

A good example that I've heard is that it's like a racehorse. That actually the jockey climbs onto the racehorse and the racehorse is considerably stronger than the jockey. But the horse submits that strength to the rider and together they run the race.

In comparison, you've got a rodeo with a bull where they don't tame the bull at all. In fact, people try to, but they're not in control. The bull takes control and throws the rider all over the place and really doesn't accomplish anything at all.

The good news, says blessed, are the humble. So humility isn't thinking less of ourselves, but it's thinking of ourselves less.

I like that interpretation of it. Being the meek means to recognise the strength God has given us and the good things God has given us. But it's also to say, well, that's on God, not on us.

[23 : 23] It's God's strength in us and we'll let him be in the driving seat. So blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. The world says the earth belongs to the strong and the powerful and the rich.

Jesus says it belongs to those who are like him, who recognise that they may have power over someone else, but chooses not to wield it. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

This isn't just blessed are those who want a little bit of justice, a little bit of righteousness. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for it, who yearn for God's righteousness.

It's not just about saying, well, that's not right, that's not fair. It's about yearning for it. It's about looking at the most vulnerable in God's kingdom and saying that hurts me to see them treated that way.

I think it's about a month ago now, a few of us are away at Spring Harvest. And I went to one of the venues, the venue that was designed for older youth and younger adults and young at heart.

[24 : 29] I think I'm getting closer to fitting into that group. Hopefully I'm not quite there yet. But one of the sessions they had there was, it was the leader of A31, who is an anti-trafficking group.

And they were talking about hunger for justice. And one of the challenges they gave is, what does God break your heart for?

Because God wants to break every one of our hearts for something. This is where I said, when we say to God, let your kingdom come, let your will be done. That's a big ask because God will do it.

If you ask God to break your heart for something, to make you really hunger and thirst for something, he will do it. You will be filled with a yearning to see God's righteousness.

I'm going to try and speed up. I'm watching time. Blessed are the merciful. For if you show mercy to others, you will also be shown mercy.

[25 : 30] Matthew 7, which I know we're not quite there yet, 1 to 3, Jesus says, you'll be judged by the measure that you use to judge others. So if you're merciful to others, God will be merciful to you.

If you're not, then, well, enjoy that conversation with God. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart.

If we long for God's way and we truly long for God, not because we want something out of it, but because we want God to be in control.

The question is, what is your motivation? Are you doing good things because it makes you feel good? Or are you doing good things because God is crying out for his people? Is it really for God or is it for you?

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. If you long to put God and God's mission first and God's righteousness first, then you will be blessed to see this good thing that he is doing.

[26 : 37] Blessed are the peacemakers, or not as I believe Tim mentioned to our young people once, blessed are the cheesemakers. Blessed are the peacemakers. I think we really need that right now, don't we?

With so much war and conflict going on, but even in our own country, with so much division, with anti-Semitism, and all sorts of other personal attacks against people.

We really need to strive to be peacemakers. That means we need to forgive when people wrong us. That means we need to humble ourselves and say, well, actually, maybe we're not that much better.

It means we need to have the heart and the attitude of God. Our goal isn't to win arguments or to win fights. It's to win hearts for God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Jesus said, if you are a peacemaker, you're like me, and you'll reflect my character into the world. Blessed are those who are persecuted. Jesus doesn't hide the fact that being a Christian is hard.

[27 : 47] He says, take up your cross and follow me. Well, Jesus died for us. All over the world, every single day, there are people risking their lives to follow Jesus.

So what are we prepared to do? When it gets a little bit hard because someone at work doesn't want to listen to us, or we don't get invited to the staff Christmas party, or our children, young people are being teased or bullied at school because people don't understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

It's going to be hard, but what are we going to do there? Are we going to hold on to our faith? Are we prepared to risk as much as everyone else does?

Or do we give up when we face someone who doesn't understand? Do we compromise on our beliefs when our values, or our values to get that promotion that we want to work, or to get something else for us?

Blessed are the persecutors, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. So we're back to the beginning again, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus reminds us the tough times on this earth are temporary, but there is something greater and eternal.

[29 : 03] Every single one of these, Jesus gives a reward for it. He actually says there's nothing wrong with wanting or striving for the rewards that God gives us.

He did say, blessed are the pure of hearts, what is your motivation? Are you doing this because you want the reward, or are you doing this because you want God? But we do get a reward for being part of God's kingdom, even if it is tough now.

We are coming in towards the end, you'll be pleased to know. Because we can't go into the whole of the Sermon on the Mount in one week. In fact, I believe Peter Swoffield is preaching on part two next week.

Because this is just the start of Jesus showing us as believers how to live a life that is set aside for him. It's about loving God, loving others, and doing good.

The Sermon on the Mount isn't a set of rules for us to unpick. It's not a checklist for grace or salvation. It's not an entry criteria for non-Christians to come to him. It's not a new set of rules.

[30 : 13] The Pharisees accused Jesus of changing the rules, but Jesus says the rules were very clear from the beginning. Love God, love others, and do good.

Jesus takes the same rules given in every single one of the other covenants. He just flips the understanding of them on their head. The Pharisees say follow these rules to be saved.

Jesus says follow these because you are saved. The world says do what you need to do to get ahead. Jesus says be meek and humble and put others first.

Today's world says following all of these rules are inconvenient, so just make up your own. Jesus says the law is simple. Love God, others, do good.

Society says you're the only one that matters. It's all about me, me, me, and you don't have to change for anything. Well, Jesus says he knows that we're not perfect, that we fall short and we miss the mark, but he loves us anyway.

[31 : 19] Human need says blend in or you'll be ridiculed. Jesus says stand out, be salt and be light. The people say that God of the New Testament is different to God of the Old Testament, but God doesn't change.

The God of grace, mercy, and forgiveness of the New Testament is the same God of grace, mercy, and forgiveness of the Old Testament. The people were not made to follow the law.

The law was made to guide people to live that life. The Torah was always about that one thing. Every one of the covenants God made was about that one thing.

Love me with everything that you are. Love my creation, love each other as you love yourselves. And do good.

I've been ahming and ahning for a while about how to actually finish this morning because we're not at the end. We've been on a journey through the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, albeit starting in the middle.

[32 : 25] But unlike most journeys, we haven't arrived at the end today. And as I mentioned, I believe Peter will take us deeper into this upside-down kingdom next week. So as we go into this week, as we explore this upside-down kingdom further, what do we take away from it?

And I think if there is just one challenge that I can give at this halfway point, it's this. Love God. Love others.

Do good. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.