

Kingdom of God Values

Our New Testament reading is Luke 6:17-26. After calling his twelve disciples, Jesus gives what is called his Sermon on the Plain. This is probably Luke's account of what in Matthew is called the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1ff). Let's note what Jesus says about Kingdom of God values: **I'll read** Luke 6:17-26:

¹⁷He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

*"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*²¹"Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*"Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

²²"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

*²⁴"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

*²⁵"Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

²⁶"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

According to Webster, values are things that we hold to be "intrinsically valuable or desirable." Value formation begins in childhood, and includes ideals and behavior we hold to be important for life and society. Our values determine our life decisions and choices that we make every day, both major and minor ones. Our values are birthed and shaped by our perspective on life. So, our mindset, worldview or life perspective determines our values, which guide our attitudes and our actions and even our eternal destiny.

Jesus' values run roughshod over religious, secular, and pagan values. In the Old Covenant, God indeed promised blessings to his people who obeyed him, and pronounced curses on a people who rejected him. But in time these words came to mean to the religious leaders of the Jews that all material prosperity was

an indication of God's special favor and that the poverty, illness, and afflictions of all sort were evidence of spiritual depravity and disenfranchisement. The legalistic religion that emerged from the Old Covenant became the exclusive purview of the proudly self-righteous who neglected God's greatest requirement—love for him and for others.

Jesus brought a great reversal of the world's values and view of things. Beginning with the Song (Magnificat) of Mary, Luke celebrates the reversal of the fortunes of the poor and rich, the hungry and the well fed, the weak and the powerful (1:51-53). With the coming of Jesus, the Good News was now being preached to the poor, the blind and the oppressed, whose fortunes would be reversed with those who now are the rich, those claiming sight, and are the oppressors of the downtrodden (4:18-19). The New Covenant was a radical reinterpretation of life, with the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God into present reality. With the coming of Jesus, we're called to live by the values of the eternal Kingdom of God. God's future has come into this present world. The salvation that Jesus gives not only provides us a hope for heaven, but also frees us immediately from the tyranny of living by the values of this fallen world.

When Jesus began his public ministry, he "went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The *time has come*,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is *near*. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Mk 1:15). The coming of Jesus marked the arrival and the availability of God's kingdom, its in-breaking into world affairs and into our lives, now! Jesus came to the earth to bring the abundant life of the Kingdom (Jn. 10:10). There are values that we have by God's creation, such as the value on life itself.

The blessings of God come when we live by his Kingdom values. And the woes, the anti-blessings, come when we live against his values. God created us to be in relationship with him—one of trust, obedience and love. We're to value what he values, including a life of prayerful dependence and obedience. We see this blessed life in the Garden of Eden, during the time that Adam and Eve walked with God in perfect fellowship, living as God intended them to. What God intended for us from the start was that we might have a heart like his, one that loves truth, righteousness, and justice and wants to be in loving fellowship with him and with others.

These beatitudes come to those who receive the grace of God. The poor and the hungry who are blessed (20-21) are not only the materially poor and physically hungry, although Jesus had special concern for the disenfranchised, who often are the most aware of their spiritual need and open to God's work in their lives. These beatitudes speak to a condition of the heart, including an awareness of spiritual poverty, a desperate yearning for God's work of grace, and grieving repentance over sin. Whenever we come into a relationship with Jesus, we have a new way of thinking. We become his new creations and we have the mind of Christ, i.e., are enabled to see things from his perspective (2

Cor. 5:17; 1 Cor. 2:16). We no longer assess things from a temporal, worldly point of view (2 Cor. 5:16). Dallas Willard wrote, "The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing...destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself," i.e. thinking Jesus' thoughts.

Walter Cronkite was a long-time television news journalist, who was the anchor for a major evening news broadcast. He would give as his closing remark, at the end of every telecast of the evening news, "And that's the way it is." I remember hearing at a pastors' conference the comment of a great preacher, Vance Havner, who was a contemporary of Conkrite. His comment was, "No, Walter. That's *not* the way it *is*. That's the way it *seems*!"

Jesus' commentary on both religious and secular events is, "That's only the way it seems." The values that are lasting and that will someday be seen to be God's eternal way of doing things are the Kingdom of God values. Scripture lists heroes of faith who saw life from God's point of view, and lived for eternal values. This is why they were willing to lose their possessions, be tortured and even sacrifice their mortal lives. They knew they were "aliens and strangers on earth...longing for a better country—a heavenly one" (Heb.11:13-16). When we "buy into" Kingdom of God values we distance ourselves from the values of this fallen world, where we're no longer at home. We live on a different plane and have a different point of view.

Week before last, Jan and I took an overnight trip which included a route through Amish country. We were almost awestruck to see how these people have been able to preserve a 19th Century lifestyle, with their dress, customs and rejection of modern conveniences. As much as I respect these people, our calling is to be even more radical. We're called to be followers of Jesus, which may lead us to real conflict with other authorities, including those we traditionally respect.

We're involved in a life of following Jesus that makes a difference in this world as well as in the next. Our prayer is that God's Kingdom will come on earth and his will be done now, even as it is being done perfectly in heaven (Matt. 6:10). If we're people with Kingdom of God values we'll be people with Jesus' values. And his values led to a cross, a cross that provided salvation for the world. If we have Kingdom of God values we'll be people who are willing to seriously follow Jesus.

A great example of a life guided by Kingdom of God values is William Wilberforce (1759-1833). Wilberforce, whose evangelical faith prompted his passionate fight against slavery, finally won a difficult 20-year struggle with the British Parliament, ending with the Slave Trade Act of 1807. Wilberforce's values were based upon his commitment to follow Jesus as Lord. He was not born with these values. He was born into an aristocratic family which was suspicious of evangelical faith, thinking its advocates to be excessively fanatical. But William Wilberforce

responded to the message of Christ preached by men like George Whitefield and Christ gave him a new mindset of values and a desire to courageously live by those values. As with Wilberforce, so with us, the life of following Jesus is never easy and requires that we take the way of the cross. This means we say “no” to our lower desires and the allurements of the fallen world and we take the path, sometimes the lonely path, of following Jesus and doing the Father’s will. It’s the counter-cultural way of life, living the life of the always unpopular and even offensive cross.

In my pastoral office in Brussels, I received a call from a delightful sounding young couple preparing to move with their company to Belgium. They asked me about life for Christian families with small children living in an environment that is basically post-Christian and secular. I assured them that Belgium is enveloped in spiritual darkness, and believers there don’t enjoy the various aids to spiritual living and the enforcement of biblical ideals still enjoyed in parts of the US, where Christianity is still somewhat cultural. But Belgium is a great place for the values of Christ and his kingdom to stand out in bold relief. In Western Europe parents can show their children the difference between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world and teach them to live counter-culturally, just as in first century Christianity. A life of following Jesus in Belgium is a less confusing alternative. It’s easier to know “which side you are on.” And over there believers are more aware of the need to walk in the Spirit to be successful in spiritual warfare.

It’s one thing to say we have Christian values and quite another to live by those values and to stand up for them, whatever the cost. Beliefs are what we live by and our convictions are what we’re willing to die for. Kingdom of God values cost William Wilberforce a life of conflict and constant struggle. These kingdom values are costing some people even today their material and physical wellbeing, even their lives, in some cases. There’s active persecution of our fellow believers around the world, but there will be a great reversal of their fortunes when Jesus vindicates them. He’ll also finally vindicate and deliver us from our adversity and will eternally bless us for our faithfulness through present trials.

The Message paraphrase brings out the force of what Jesus is saying about the great reversal of blessing that will come to those who follow Jesus now, through life’s difficulties:

“You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all.
God’s kingdom is there for the finding.

“You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry.
Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal.

“You’re blessed when the tears flow freely.
Joy comes with the morning.”

The Kingdom of God through Jesus broke into the present and yet it brought into this present world the reality of God's eternal kingdom and reign. Those of us who've begun to follow Jesus and have received his gift of new life already participate in God's future and all that we are and do has eternal value. In these beatitudes and woes, Jesus describes a reversal of fortune, from blessing to woe.

Jesus uses a business term, "paid in full" (24), to describe the ungodly who live in oblivion to God and his present and future kingdom. There's been a slogan seen on car bumper stickers for some years now, which reflects this philosophy of fools, as Jesus called it (above). It reads, "The one who dies with the most toys wins." This satanic lie blatantly defies all good sense, and yet amazingly many people live by it and die by it, to the loss of their souls.

These beatitudes describe the acquisition of a godly character, which is the believer's everlasting and glorious reward. Paul speaks of this hope of making eternal investments, which places our present difficulties in proper perspective (2 Cor. 4:16-17). This hope keeps us from being disheartened by present trials, knowing that God is at work through all of our circumstances to prepare us for everlasting glory.

The strategy of the Savior was to focus on instilling into his followers about Kingdom of God values. When we live by Kingdom values, God uses us to make a difference in the world, like he used William Wilberforce. If we live with the mindset of Jesus, realizing the worth of persons, and making investments for eternity, lives will be changed.

Jesus knew the disciples would need motivation to serve and that they would, especially in the difficult days, want to know "What's in it for me?" It's one thing to say we have Christian or Kingdom of God values and quite another thing to be willing to live for them and die for them or even to be consistent with them. Especially as Election Day draws near, we Christians want our President and legislators, our school teachers and our community leaders to have high values, but what about the values that we live daily and demonstrate? Do they reflect those of the Lord Jesus and the cruciform life he calls us to live?

I recall in my seminary days hearing an African American preacher in chapel challenge us to have a mindset for service. This was cross-cultural for the "Me Generation," that was always asking, even in ministry preparation, "What's in it for me?" Many of my fellow students were interviewing with prospective churches and were concerned about adequate compensation and about being on the right career path for success in ministry. This preacher, however, challenged this mindset with the need to have a Kingdom of God mindset. He said that we shouldn't be asking, "What's in *it* for *me*?" Rather, our question should be, as we think about eternal values and consequences, "What's *in me* for *it*?"

