

21: PIZZA IS BETTER EATEN, AND LIFE IS BETTER LIVED, UPSIDE DOWN (Luke 6:20-26)

Matt McKenna, writing on medium.com, recently wrote;

Pizza tastes better upside down.

By barrel-rolling the flavor into your mouth's flavor receptors you will get a better eating experience. You know, provided you didn't jam it into your face directly from the oven.

Here's the thing. Having said all that, I know you don't believe me. I wouldn't believe me. I wouldn't have been persuaded by this at all. It sounds stupid.

So how about this? Do me a favor. Next time you eat a pizza, just try it. Maybe just on one slice. Next time you eat pizza, do a barrel roll. Next time you eat a pizza, eat it upside down.

It'll taste better.

Or, worst case scenario, the kids will get a kick out of the experiment.¹

Living life, like eating pizza, is also better when experienced upside down. We're certainly used to being driven by all the things that are right side up- namely the pursuit of power, popularity, pleasure and pennies. But Jesus calls us to an upside down life. That's exactly what Jesus specifically points to in Luke 6:20-26. He contrasts the "right side up" with the "upside down", and shows us that the ways of the Kingdom of God are upside down.

First let's give a little context to this chunk of scripture.

In Luke 6:20, Jesus begins what has often been called "The Sermon on the Plain", which is Luke's equivalent to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Some believe these are different sermons, some believe they are the same one, recorded with different emphases from the writers Luke and Matthew. Luke presents this sermon without the legal elements that Matthew treated, probably because of his Gentile audience.²

The fact that Luke can summarize for Gentiles what Jesus originally delivered to a Jewish audience shows how timeless and fundamental the Evangelist saw this ethic as being for the Christian community. This view holds true whether the sermon is an anthology of Jesus' remarks or reflects a single occasion. The fact of conceptual parallels to Matthew shows that what Jesus taught must still be taken seriously by Jesus' disciples today.³

And remember, we got a summary introduction to Jesus' teaching ministry in the preceding verses Luke 6:17 - 19, which is the fourth such summary to appear in Luke (cf. 4:14 - 15, 31 - 32, 40 - 41). Following that is the actual sermon (6:20 - 49), whose major theme is a call to exceptional love in light of the offer of God's gracious blessing. Jesus outlines what he desires of his followers, especially as they relate to those outside the community, including those who oppose them.⁴

It's important to note from vv. 17-19 that Jesus ministered here to three groups: apostles, "a large crowd of his disciples," and "a great number of people." He preached "on a level place." The locale may have been a level area in the midst of a more mountainous region (Isa. 13:2; Jer. 21:13). The people gathered for two reasons: to listen to Jesus' teaching and to be healed by him. Teaching and compassionate service combined to touch the people. Jesus' message of God's kindness was supported by his

¹ <https://medium.com/@matthewjamesmckenna/just-the-tip-pizza-is-better-upside-down-a819c562d625#>

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actions. The healings involved both sicknesses and exorcisms. The power that proceeded from Jesus indicated the authority with which He worked.⁵

The sermon also begins with a prophetic call — an invitation and warning to those listening to him. The first part declares God’s grace of blessing to those who identify with him. In contrast, the woes, unique to Luke’s Gospel, show God’s displeasure on those who oppose the blessing Jesus gives and who persecute his disciples as a result.⁶

The four descriptions of the righteous in verses 20 - 22 should not be seen as separate groups, but as elements of one portrait describing those for whom God has compassion. The blessings of God’s promised rule belong to such as these.⁷

With all that, let’s dig into the verses piece by piece! Because vv. 20-22 and 23-26 mirror each other we’ll contrast them accordingly.

20 Then looking up at his disciples, (Jesus) said: Blessed are you who are poor, because the kingdom of God is yours. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your comfort. (Luke 6:20; 24)

So the “poor” are discussed first. This term recalls Jesus’ remarks in 4:16 - 20. As with that passage, the poor are the pious poor, who are blessed because they have a position in the kingdom of God, the delivering rule of his presence. These poor are the special objects of Jesus’ ministry, as Luke repeatedly mentions (1:52 - 53; 4:16 - 20; 7:22; 14:13, 21). The roots of this idea appear in Psalms and in prophets like Isaiah (Pss. 25:9; 34:2; Isa. 42:1 - 18; 61:1). Jesus preached and ministered to all the poor as a means of finding the responsive and pious among them who would receive God’s grace. Such people understood that they must depend on God, because life was beyond their control.⁸

Conversely, the “rich” are singled out because they often take advantage of the poor (James 2:1 - 7; 5:1 - 6). The remark is, of course, a generalization, since some rich do respond to the Gospel. But the warning is serious, for wealth can create a sense of independence that results in distance from God and callousness toward others (1 Tim. 6:6 - 18). The “comfort” is their wealth, which they cannot take with them.⁹

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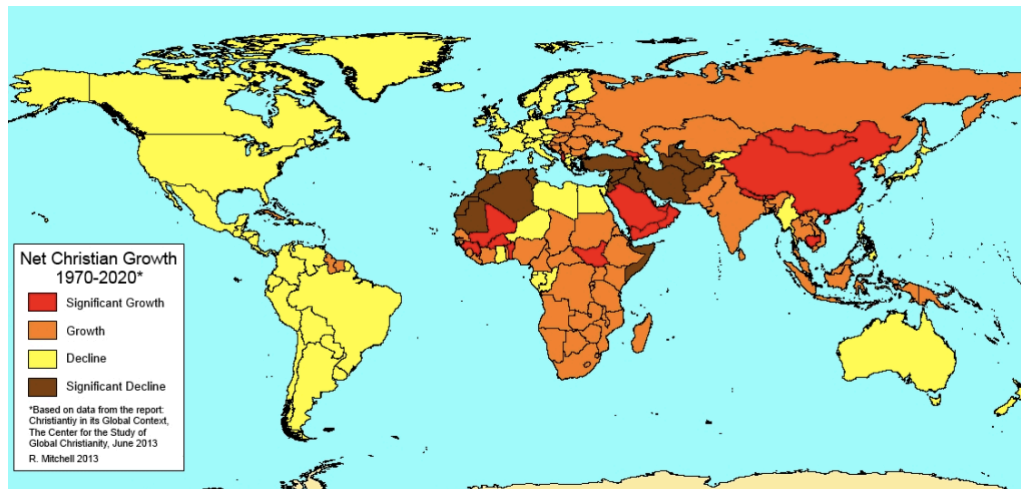
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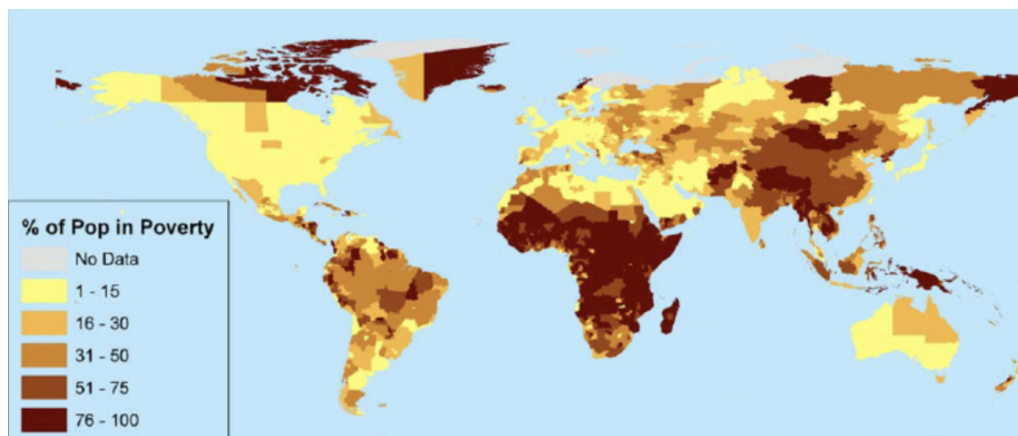
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The Kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit, and the financially poor are accordingly more likely to be receptive to the ways of the Kingdom. This is upside down from the way our world works. We would more likely say “Cursed are you who are poor, because the kingdom of the earth will mow you down. Blessed are you who are rich, because you’ll live a life of comfort.” Not so with Jesus!

In fact, check out this map of the world of the countries where Christianity is in growth or decline:



Now compare it to a map of the countries where the poverty rate is highest amongst the population:



It doesn't translate entirely, but it's clear to see that where there are less physical resources, there is more receptivity to the gospel! We need to pay attention to what our brothers and sisters from around the globe are saying! We need to learn, among others,

from the Church in Nigeria, China, The Philippines, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Tanzania¹⁰

Right along with that, the Africa Bible Commentary poignantly notes:

The church has a critical role to play in ensuring that the voices of the poor reverberate in the halls of public policy. Perhaps we should even go further and say that the preaching of the gospel will be truly liberating when the poor themselves are the preachers. The location of many churches in the midst of poverty creates strategic opportunities for the faith community to work to eradicate poverty.¹¹

What does this mean for us who are Americans?

Well for one, we need to take the warnings to the rich in 1 Tim. 6:6 - 18, Rev. 3:14-22, and Matt. 19:16-30 seriously. The Scriptures do not mess around in warning us who have much. Even those of us who are lower middle class Americans are statistically amongst some of the wealthiest people in the world! We need to understand this. We live in a very spoiled culture that breeds consumerism, individualism and selfishness. It numbs us to the voice of God in our lives. We need a radical realignment!

Plus, those of us who are in America and follow Jesus need to care for the poor. We need to care for the poor amongst us in our cities and towns, and we need to care for the poor of the globe. We should use what we've been given to bless the lives of others. Why not go ahead and make sure we shove our camel butts through the eye of that needle?

¹⁰ <https://thewitness.org/where-is-christianity-growing-the-most>

¹¹ Africa Bible Commentary Africa Bible Commentary, Tokunboh Adeyemo, General Editor. Copyright © 2006, 2010, and 2022 by ABC Editorial Board.



I wish less of us would compare ourselves to Mark Zuckerberg, and more of us would compare ourselves to Jesus. And if we're not fully willing to compare ourselves to Jesus, then we'd at least compare ourselves to someone who loved Jesus very much, like Rich Mullins.

Although Rich was a successful Christian musician he had such a heart for the children on a Navajo reservation in New Mexico that he went back to school and graduated with a B.A. in Music Education in 1995 and moved there to teach them music. The profits from his tours and album sales were handled by his accountant who gave Rich only the amount of an average working person's salary to live on, and gave the rest away to charities, per Rich's instructions. He didn't want to know how much money he was making or how much he was worth.¹²

So with all that in mind, let's say the words of Jesus again...

Blessed are you who are poor, because the kingdom of God is yours. (Luke 6:20)

Jesus also addresses hunger in the sermon on the plain.

21 Blessed are you who are hungry now, because you will be filled. 25 Woe to you who are now full, for you will be hungry. (Luke 6:21a; 25a)

Upside down as always, Jesus says that those who hunger now are promised satisfaction in the future. Hunger is a result of religious persecution and harsh treatment

¹² <https://singleness.org/a-journey-to-identity-belonging-and-purpose/>

by people of power who take advantage of others. Hunger is one of the consequences of poverty (cf. Isa. 32:6 - 7; 58:6 - 7, 9 - 10; Ezek. 18:7, 16). These “hungry” people Jesus refers to in Luke 6:21 may be deficient in material goods, but they have turned to God for care, and he will care for them and satisfy them. The blessing they will receive transcends any lack they have now.¹³

The next contradictory woe is against those “who are well fed now.” In a classic case of reversal, they will be hungry on the Judgment Day — a warning that recalls the Old Testament (Isa. 5:22; 6:13; Amos 8:11). Those who ignore God and place their hopes solely on the good life here have little comfort for the future.¹⁴

Again, when I reflect on these words of Jesus I can’t help but think about our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world and how they can inspire us to greater faithfulness towards Christ. I recently read an account of a pastor in a persecuted country who was put in prison for his faith, repeatedly tortured with electric batons, brutal beatings, being urinated on, and being forced to sleep in human feces. While seeking God amidst this, He decided to fast while in prison and share the food he was given with other prisoners, which opened up opportunities to share Christ with some of them and lead them to faith, and baffled the prison guards as God miraculously kept the man alive through such pain and difficulty.

I wonder what the words “Blessed are you who are hungry now, because you will be filled” meant to this dear brother in the Lord!

What’s the application for all of us? We are meant to be hungry for Jesus, the Word, prayer, His presence, His goodness, His righteousness, His love, His patience, His kindness, His peace, and His eternal Kingdom! We, in our flesh, are naturally hungry for power, pleasure, popularity, and pennies. Power leaves us empty and wanting more. Pleasures leave us numb and chasing the first high or experience. Popularity makes us feel isolated, duplicitous, weird and alone. Though we can never seem to have enough of them no matter how many we have, pennies can’t buy us love. God designed us and Christ calls us back into our true life of living upside down where we hunger for the eternal things beyond this life!

Jesus continues;

Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh. Woe to you who are now laughing, for you will mourn and weep. (Luke 6:21b; 25b)

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Those who are poor and hungry are also sad because of the strain of life, but there will come a time when they will laugh. God sees their tears, and their tears will be turned upside down and become smiles. Disappointment and pain will turn into joy. Weeping as a picture of those who suffer unjustly is also an Old Testament theme (Pss. 126:5 - 6; 137:1; Isa. 40:1 - 2). Those who weep have paid the price of painful rejection for lining up with God.¹⁵

Those who “laugh now” will someday mourn and weep (cf. Isa. 65:14); they are too enthralled with the pursuit of life to care about anything else.¹⁶

Have you ever seen the Friends episode with Alec Baldwin playing Phoebe’s new boyfriend “Parker”, who they also called “enthusiastic Parker?”



The script from the episode “The One In Massapequa” reads as follows;

(Phoebe and Parker enter)

Phoebe: Hey!

All: Hi!

Phoebe: Everybody, this is Parker, Parker this is...

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Parker: No, no, no wait! Don't tell me. Let me guess. (Points as he says their names) Joey, Monica, Ross, Rachel and, I'm sorry Phoebe didn't mention you. (Chandler makes a face) Chandler, I'm kidding already you're my favorite!

Chandler: Ha!

Parker: Why don't all of you tell me a little about yourself?

Ross: Ah, actually, I'm sorry we-we probably should get going.

Parker: (laughs) Classic Ross. Rachel, Rachel, oh how you glow. May I? (Puts hand on her stomach)

Rachel: I, uh, think you already are.

Parker: Rachel, you have life growing inside you. Is there anything in this world more miraculous than—Oh a picture of a dog! Whose is this?

Monica: That's my old dog. He passed away years ago.

Parker: Oh well, at least you were lucky to have him. Bow-wow old friend, bow-wow.¹⁷

As you can see, Baldwin's character "Parker", didn't understand this Proverb of Solomon;

Singing songs to a troubled heart is like taking off clothing on a cold day or like pouring vinegar on soda. (Prov. 25:20)

Have you ever run into a person that totally doesn't read you correctly and just thinks the answer for everything is to give you blazing, sugar coated positivity? That's like singing "don't worry, be happy" to someone struggling with a troubled heart. That's like taking off clothing on a cold day- it's the opposite of what one needs. It's like pouring vinegar on soda and will bring about an explosive reaction, not a positive one!

I can't help but think that's a little of what Jesus had in mind here. We can be so addicted to "laughter"- or positivity and fun, that we become blind to the pain that people are feeling around us. Those who experience the deep, real, profound pain of true mourning ache with God's pain over the struggles within those He has created in His image. To mourn well is to lament well is to sympathize well and even empathize well. It is right to experience the pain of injustice, sin, evil, despair and death that is inflicted on those around us as well as ourselves.

¹⁷ Watch this clip of Friends here: <https://youtu.be/kCobcQr3TKQ?si=5QSHdAj9Mnh9YN5l>

Genuine weeping, mourning and lamenting with the hurting and broken is better than fake laughter with the careless. This is certainly what the writer of Ecclesiastes was getting at when he wrote;

2 It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, since that is the end of all mankind, and the living should take it to heart. 3 Grief is better than laughter, for when a face is sad, a heart may be glad. 4 The heart of the wise is in a house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in a house of pleasure. 5 It is better to listen to rebuke from a wise person than to listen to the song of fools. (Eccl. 7:2-5)

Lord, lead us not to be addicted to laughter and pleasure to the detriment of caring for our own souls as well as the souls of others! Let us not be “too enthralled with the pursuit of life to care about anything else”, but to keep the rhythms of Your Spirit alive within us!

Jesus concludes in these blessings and woes by pointing to the reality of persecution and mistreatment;

22 Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you, insult you, and slander your name as evil because of the Son of Man. 23 “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy. Take note—your reward is great in heaven, for this is the way their ancestors used to treat the prophets. 26 Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for this is the way their ancestors used to treat the false prophets. (Luke 6:22-23; 26)

Again, upside down from what one would think, Jesus prophesied accurately in this context that “blessed” people would suffer hatred, insult, rejection, and exclusion from the Jewish community. That community would, in fact, give them an “evil name,” because they had come to the Son of Man, that is, to Jesus. These remarks clearly presupposed a life that has faced religious persecution, and the four descriptions depicted an escalating negative reaction to their association with Jesus.

Religious convictions were not a private matter in ancient times, similar to many countries outside the West today. A choice for Jesus meant the loss of family fellowship, dismissal from the synagogue, and removal from social contact. To be tossed from the synagogue meant being viewed as an unclean person. Yet despite such circumstances, Jesus urged the disciples to rejoice, for God saw them and would bless them. They had ancestors, the great prophets of old, who were treated similarly. The call to “rejoice” was

the one **command** among the blessings; everything else was a **promise**. God's grace would help them overcome their suffering for their faith.¹⁸

In contrast, the final woe revealed the spiritual depravity of those not belonging to Christ and not facing persecution. They were spoken well of by others, just like the false prophets of old. They settled for an approach to life that did not challenge them to live any differently. They wrongly saw themselves as unaccountable to God.¹⁹

Again, I've already spoken of the kind of persecution that many in the global Church are facing right now. Persecution towards true disciples of Jesus is globally worse, in 2024, than any other time in history. Disciples in China, Afghanistan, North Korea, Iran, many parts of India, and more, are starkly and literally "hated, excluded, insulted, and slandered" by their adversaries, simply because they believe in Jesus and Jesus is so alive in them that the lifestyle, words, and actions of Christ are blasting out of their lives in the faces of their enemies. Jesus was certainly pointing to that in Luke 6:22-23.

Contextually to the First Century, A.D, Jesus was also pointing to the fact that many in the parties of the Pharisees and Saducees of the time would also, quite literally, like the hypocritical leaders of ancient Israel persecuted the prophetic writers of the Old Testament prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, etc.), persecute disciples of Jesus. This did happen voraciously and is documented all throughout the book of Acts- so it came to pass within a few years of Christ's prophetic utterance here.

If, in fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Tim. 3:12) Then what does it mean to be "persecuted" in the West?

Many people in the "Christian West" think persecution means that people of opposing viewpoints will get mad at them when they judge them, mistreat them, and accost them. They get into arguments with people, trying to force them to believe in Christ, lacing their witness with political preferences and moral superiority. But isn't the fruit of the Spirit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? (Gal. 5:22-23a) A "persecution complex" like this isn't real persecution, or a fruit of true discipleship. It's the ego imposed upon the gospel. It's dangerous and destructive to the witness of Christ and His Body, the Ekklesia, God's people, His Church.

However, if we truly live lives of accountability to God, God will call us to prophetically make decisions that go against the flow of those around us, and His holiness in us will

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disrupt, provoke, and challenge those around us. His sobriety in us will challenge the alcoholism and drug addiction of those around us. His responsibility in us will challenge the laziness of those around us. His generosity will challenge the stinginess in those around us. His love will challenge the hate in those around us. His joy will challenge the grimness of those around us. His peace will challenge the tumultuousness of those around us. His patience will challenge the impatience, kindness challenge the rudeness, goodness challenge the impurity, faithfulness challenge the dishonesty, gentleness challenge the harshness, and self-control challenge the lack of control.

12 Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. 13 Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are ridiculed for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or a meddler. 16 But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in having that name. 17 For the time has come for judgment to begin with God's household, and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God? 18 And if a righteous person is saved with difficulty, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? 19 So then, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator while doing what is good. (1 Peter 4:12-19)

I'm not sure if you know this but people in the world hate being made to feel like they're wrong, even if they are wrong. If Christ is living in us and His righteousness is shining through us, He will certainly offend people through us. But we need to pay no mind to it, and live in the unoffended state of peace that only He can guide us into. We are to respond, at all times, in love (Rom. 12:9-21) We are to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than ourselves. Every one of us should look not to our own interests, but rather to the interests of others." (Phil 2:3-4)

What did Jesus mean when He said "Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for this is the way their ancestors used to treat the false prophets?"

As we've already established, contextually, in the First Century, becoming a disciple of Jesus within the Israelite religious system would have meant being ostracized in every way imaginable. On the contrary, those **doing** the ostracizing of early Christians would have been "spoken well of" by both the hotshots in the religious institutions and the Roman elites of the time. Both equally wanted Christianity to be stamped out for different reasons.

For us in 2024 America, I simply think the application is that we don't want to live in a posture where we're trying to get "all people to speak well of us". Jesus is calling us to lives of authenticity and integrity in Him, not chameleon-esque duplicity. False prophets throughout Israel's history were guilty of duplicity, flattery, and manipulation. A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth causes ruin. (Prov 26:28) They played politics, told people what they wanted to hear, and all in the pursuit of power, popularity, pleasure and pennies.

If we live lives of the true integrity and authenticity of Christ living in us, there will be times where we simply can't help but tell people, with graciousness and poise, things that they don't desire to hear. But we'll be so tethered to Christ that we won't care, and will desire Him more than the approval of others.

Jesus calls His disciples to live an upside down life! The people whom Jesus calls 'blessed' the world would call 'wretched'; and the people for whom Jesus prophesies 'woe' are those whom the world professes to admire. This sermon completely overturns the world's values.²⁰ May we allow Jesus to overturn the world's values in us! A world that wants to keep us bitter, angry, resentful, selfish, addicted, isolated, apathetic, hopeless, nervous and crazy! Jesus give us Your joy, Your peace, Your forgiveness, Your generosity, Your openness, Your sobriety, Your relationships, Your passion, Your hope, Your confidence, Your boldness, and Your assurance!!!!

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