

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week, Jesus had a large crowd of disciples and multitudes of people eager for healing and his teaching. We heard the blessings and woes, where the poor would be blessed, and those consumed by wealth and power would ultimately be left high and dry.

This week is a continuation of Christ's message from last week. Same crowd, same time, same place. If we were to sum up these episodes, it would be: Rolling out the blueprint for the Messianic Kingdom, also known as the Kingdom of God.

What did the earthly kingdom look like in Jesus' time? As I have often mentioned, the kingdom in Jesus' time was built on honor, wealth, status, and power. Relationships were transactional. If I do this for you, I expect you to reciprocate and do something for me. By doing something good for each other, we can increase our own honor and status in society. On the other hand, if you are abused or cursed by someone else, they can expect reciprocation through some sort of retaliation. These types of transactions, whether positive or negative, can occur between any people, regardless of whether they care for the other person or not. These relationships are somewhat legalistic in nature, to simply do what I have to,

and keep the scores balanced between people. Personal sacrifice and generosity are really moot.

Jesus uses the words, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” So, that sort of fits in with the idea of reciprocation. It’s like the “Scales of Justice” that we see. One side balances with the other. It represents the balance between truth and fairness.

As we look close at the blueprint of the Kingdom of God, we find that Jesus is teaching the workers to do much more than “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Jesus looks to demolish the foundations built on honor, wealth, status, and power, and to build a stronger, more durable foundation built on love. When it is built on love, then the voiceless have a voice, the hopeless have hope, and the greedy, self-centered people will be left powerless (leaving them high and dry). This Kingdom of God takes the definition of ‘success’ held by those in the earthly kingdom, and turns them upside down.

So, Jesus begins demolition by tossing out the scale and dismantling the attitude of reciprocation. He challenges us to love our enemies. I don’t know about you, but I don’t do a magnificent job of loving those I love, much less those I dislike. He says to lend to anyone who asks without any expectations of being

paid back. He says that when we are cursed and persecuted, we should not only abandon the idea of retaliation, but that we should pray for them.

But if we read the fine print on the blueprint, Jesus is looking to tip the scales. It is the Golden Rule pumped up on steroids. Building a foundation based on love is actively caring about what is best for them, to give them every opportunity to love, and to have a change of heart, if necessary. Lending to everyone who asks, without an expectation of return, sends the message that the lender will never lose hope that the person will ultimately repay. When persecuted, Jesus uses the example of turning the other cheek, or being passive when being someone takes advantage of you. This teaching is meant to break the cycle of retaliation.

Then, Jesus tells us that the owner of the kingdom is “kind to those who are ungrateful and wicked.” This ups the ante on the Golden Rule. To restate it in this new image could sound something like: Do to others as God would do.

The relationships are no longer reciprocal, or transactional, in nature. Relationships are based on love and kindness. Do kind things for those you like and dislike without expectations. Be respectful and kind to those who you despise. Do not judge. God will judge you with the same measuring stick that you use to judge others. In judgment, we divide and wound. In mercy, we unite and initiate healing. When we seek understanding, we seek solidarity.

If you wish to live in the Messianic Kingdom, social norms no longer apply. The Kingdom of God, we treat each other as God would treat them, with forgiveness, kindness, mercy, and love, and we are challenged to live into this Kingdom, to bring it into reality here and now.

So what does this mean for us, today? We live in a divisive world. We live in an unkind world. ‘Winning arguments’ outweighs ‘winning hearts.’ Self-advancement outweighs working for the common good. The search for the balance of truth and justice has fallen victim to opinions and the elevation of self-importance. The responsibilities that come with freedom have been replaced by perceived assaults on personal rights. It’s all about me, and not about we.

Where has compassion gone? Where has compromise gone? Where has giving someone “the benefit of the doubt” gone? When did respect for another succumb to harshness and rudeness? When did the feelings of others become useless collateral waste?

In my mind, this Gospel is one of the hardest to digest. When my dignity is attacked, how can I find tolerance? When those values I hold holy and dear are discarded like a fast-food bag, how can I find assurance that God has me? When I have given my best only to have my efforts dismissed as unacceptable, how can I find the strength to persevere? It is hard to accept that when others tear me down, God still has my back, and encourages me to rise above adversity. After all, I will

be either measured with the yardstick of judgment (division and painful), or I will be measured with the yardstick of mercy (healing and unitive). Will I feel the pain of judgment, or the soothing balm of healing? It is my choice.

When someone cuts you off in traffic and waves at you with only one finger, cut him/her a little slack. When someone is short with you, imagine that he/she is probably carrying something of which you are unaware. If someone insults you, do not retaliate, but rather keep that person in your prayers. They need every opportunity to have a change of heart.

The Kingdom of God, will not be built overnight. Rome wasn't built in a day. The Kingdom of God will take lifetime upon lifetime to build. It's hard, and often thankless, work. There are no unions to ensure fair play. As workers in the Kingdom of God we are called to act beyond our normal job duties. It is to pour out unending forgiveness, kindness, and mercy, no matter what. It is with these tools that we can lay the foundation of love. Without this foundation, any attempts to build God's Kingdom will fail. So, pack your tool belts, we have much work to do.