

*The World Turned Upside Down*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Proverbs 4:1-12, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Luke 6:12-26*

This week's third scripture passage is from Luke 6:12-26. Last week, we read about how Jesus' teachings about the Sabbath shocked the Pharisees. This week, we see how He continues to defy everyone's expectations. Here's what Luke writes...

“One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.””

The last week has been the week of the Watchmen. The violent saga of a group of vigilante superheroes was the number one movie last weekend. It's a movie about an alternate history – what if ordinary people in costumes decided to fight crime and helped shape history? What if Watergate never happened and Nixon never resigned and went on to lead America to the brink of nuclear annihilation? It's a dark film that I wouldn't recommend to most people, but it is a challenging movie about a world turned upside down. It's ironic that it comes out right now, just as our own world has been going through an economic rollercoaster that has made things seem wrong side up. People who had thought they were making good decisions are now considered “upside down” on their car loans and mortgages. Jobs aren't stable. Predictability is out the window. As the old Chinese curse goes, “May you live in interesting times!” Maybe that's why **Watchmen** made so much money last weekend...people don't mind watching an upside down world if it isn't their own.

But the truth is, we long for stability. We want things to make sense. We want to be able to count on something. We wouldn't even mind \$4 gasoline if we had our 401K accounts from six months ago back! In the midst of it all, our only true stability is in God. God is our eternal provider who we can count on in all situations. But what today's reading shows us is that the faith we have in God must be centered on Him and not our expectations of how He will act. In today's passage, Jesus shows that what the world calls foolish, God calls brilliant.

Last week, we read about how the Pharisees were furious with Jesus about His teachings about the Sabbath. He needed help. He needed more than just followers who would listen to Him; He needed to organize His disciples and have some He knew He could count on to be His ambassadors. He would call them His apostles, which means that they were to be His messengers, the ones who would carry His story to the world. And so He spends the whole night in prayer. He is talking with God the Father all night to make sure He picks the right ones out of all those in the crowd who've been following Him. We know that Jesus didn't decide on His apostles on the spur of the moment or without careful time in discussion with the Heavenly Father. We know that Jesus will choose the right people for the job.

The list of the apostles is really simple, both here and in the other gospels. There is no fanfare about it. We don't get a description of how Jesus went to each one and selected them out of everybody else. This isn't **American Idol** where everybody waits to see who's going to get eliminated from the next round. It's matter of fact. But when we look at the list a little more closely, it could be easy to question Jesus' decision.

First, we've got Simon, who Jesus calls Peter, or "the rock." He's always listed first, and Peter would eventually be the first to speak to the crowds after the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples. He would lead the church. But at this point, he's just a fisherman, a hot-headed one with a reputation for reacting instead of thinking. He's already declared to Jesus that he is a sinner not worth being a disciple. And yet Jesus chooses him anyway.

Then the list continues... Simon's brother Andrew, James, and John, more fisherman with likely very little formal education or abilities beyond their trade. Then there's Philip. In the last week of His life, Jesus says, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?" Philip couldn't put all the pieces together until after Jesus' death and resurrection. There's Matthew, the former tax collector hated by his fellow Jews... Thomas, famous for doubting the truth of the resurrection until he placed his hands in Jesus' wounds. Simon the Zealot, who was an early member of the revolutionary party that wanted to violently overthrow Rome and return Israel to self-rule. Then there's Bartholomew, James son of Alphaeus, Judas son of James, and these three the Bible tells us absolutely nothing about whatsoever! Finally, there is Judas Iscariot, the man who would eventually betray Jesus into the hands of His enemies.

Now imagine that we were trying to market a new brand of soda – we're going to call it Covenant Cola – and we got to choose twelve people to make sure that everybody would try it out. Would you choose a guy with anger management problems and his business partners in the fishing business? Would you choose a guy who would continually forget the brand name? Maybe we should hire someone hated by all the rest of the team as a crook and another guy who goes around saying, "I don't believe anybody's going to want to drink this"? How about adding to the team a revolutionary who thinks he's going to change the world by bringing down the government? Then add three more guys who you never see or hear from again! If that's not enough, select somebody who's going to take the formula for Covenant Cola and sell it to Pepsi. Nobody has an MBA or marketing degree. And when things get really bad, everybody's going to quit working for us! Could you imagine it? You can't think of a worse team to sell our pop, right? That's exactly what Jesus' list looks like... by human standards, this is an awful list of apostles!

But Jesus didn't choose His apostles by human standards. He chose them by God's standards. He didn't talk to a marketing department or get advice on how best to spread the word that God's Kingdom was coming. He simply went to the Father and did what the Father told Him to do. And while that list seems crazy to us, think about it...eleven of these twelve men spread the word of God far and wide. Church history tells us that even the ones we never hear about again make waves for the Kingdom. We sit here this morning as a testimony to the power of God to choose His own people to do His task. Because of that decision and the Holy Spirit's work through those apostles, billions of people worldwide now know and love Jesus Christ. A foolish group? Sure, to the way we think, but not to God.

Then we're on to the second half of the lesson. Luke has set things up for us – Jesus is on a plain, and a multitude of people from all over the place have shown up. A lot of His disciples who have followed Him for a while are here. New people are here seeking healing, seeking help, wanting just to touch His garment, wanting to hear His words and find out for themselves just who this amazing man is. The power He displays shows He is a true authority. The words He is about to say have weight because He has already done so many miracles in their midst. And He needs that authority, because what He says goes against what everybody expects.

Jesus states that four groups of people are blessed: those who are poor, those who hunger now, those who weep now, and those who will endure hatred because of Him. Now this simply doesn't make sense. Some of us have heard these blessings – usually in Matthew's recording of the Sermon on the Mount – and we just take them for granted. But this list is really odd! None of these groups of people are blessed in the way we think of blessings. And that was true of Jesus' listeners, too. The Jews believed that God rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked and that was that. Poverty and hunger and mourning must have been caused by something you did to deserve it. There's a lot of that mentality around today, still. A lot of times, somebody who comes to a soup kitchen or food pantry is judged before they ever walk in the door...a lot of people won't even look for help because they think they will be ostracized. And people go to great lengths to avoid offending others. We have become a nation where many fear talking about their faith because they would rather get along than start an argument.

But Jesus reverses everything. Jesus says that the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor. Now this isn't a substitute for the salvation that Jesus provides. What Jesus is saying is that those who are truly poor, who know they have nothing, are in the right place to accept the free gift of salvation that He offers. There's nothing to get in the way of them realizing what a fantastic gift Jesus gives. Those who hunger will be satisfied; those who weep will laugh. Through Christ, God is going to provide for them what they really need...not temporary food, not momentary sympathy, but eternal satisfaction, eternal joy, eternal freedom from their burdens. They will accept His gift of salvation and find themselves in the loving arms of the Heavenly Father. And blessed will be those who are persecuted for Jesus' sake. Jesus knows that His message will be misunderstood, that some will hate Christians rather than to turn from the sins we preach against. But our reward will be great if we stand up to persecution because we will be doing what our Heavenly Father asks of us. The blessings will come, but they will be far different from the world could ever expect.

Then Jesus tells us the woes. Woes to the rich, the well-fed, the laughers, to those who society loves, He says. He reverses His audience's expectations. Conventional wisdom says that God gives wealth to those who deserve it, to the righteous. But Jesus doesn't think so. Jesus knows the Bible and real wisdom that says things like Proverbs 28:6, "Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse." Jesus knows the truth – that having a lot of possessions can make us less interested in God. How many people have so much but give just a little to those in need because they've "earned" what they have? How many people, both rich and poor, refuse to believe that God is the giver of all gifts large and small? Jesus pronounces woes on those who have their good things now...not because they are bad, but because those good things are nothing apart from the God who gives them. It seems strange for Jesus to condemn those who laugh. We laugh here a lot! But this is not the laughter of joy that comes from knowing God. This is not the laughter that comes from a good joke or a good friend. This is laughter at the expense of those who weep. This is the laughter that comes from having security in possessions and things rather than God's goodness. Those who laugh at others' misfortune will eventually weep at their own. And be careful if everyone thinks well of you, says Jesus. If you're the kind of person everyone loves, you're like the false prophets who told the Israelites what they wanted to hear rather than the harsh reality that God hates sin and wants us to flee from it and turn to Him. Woe to those who compromise their testimony about God to be well-liked.

All of this can hit us like a brick. Jesus makes us look at everything differently. But how do we live it out? How can we make sense of what Jesus wants us to do and how He wants us to live? For one, we have got to be in prayer if we hope to be in step with God's desires. It is no accident that Christ is fervently praying to His Father before choosing His disciples and teaching the crowds. The question "why" has been answered for us. Jesus says what He does and chooses who He does because of His close relationship with the Father. In John 5, Jesus describes His relationship with the Father this way...he says, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does." These choices and words are not made from human wisdom; they are made by God's wisdom. Think about what we heard from 1 Corinthians 1 this morning: "Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God."

This doesn't mean we don't use common sense, and it doesn't mean that we don't make smart decisions. But it does mean that we have to be turning to God to see what we might be missing. Who might we hire for a new job who doesn't have a sterling reputation but needs a second chance? Who might we befriend who always seems so full of sadness? Who might we reach out to in a time of need that we've always written off before? God might have some surprising answers for us. We need to be in prayer to be shown God's wisdom.

Another step we can take...we need to get in the “blessings” line and out of the “woe” line. That might mean some changes that seem strange to us. You may have a lot of stuff or very little. But who do you thank for it? Do you remember that everything you own belongs to God? Are you asking God how you can use what you have for His glory? We can all think about this one. Jesus talks about the rich and the poor a lot, but they are relative terms. A person who has nothing but is thankful for whatever they have is truly rich. A rich person who never has enough is poverty-stricken. And the person who doesn't realize that the blessings we have aren't just for us is out in the dark too. We can't feed every hungry person; we can't give every homeless person a bed and every cold person a coat. But just because we can't reach everybody doesn't mean that we shouldn't help as many as we can.

Let's look at the other parts of the blessings. Are we hungry for more of God? Are we happy with an hour on Sundays? Or is it not enough? Are we feasting at Bible studies and fellowship times? Those who are hungry for more of God will receive it. Do you mourn for the lost? Have you ever really seriously thought about the fate of those who don't know Jesus Christ to the point of tears? Have you ever prayed for someone to come to know Him personally as their Savior and Lord so that they might know forgiveness and not condemnation? That kind of mourning is blessed because it drives us to bring more people to Christ. That kind of mourning God will honor. And are you willing to stand up for what is right no matter the cost? Willing to suffer for the name of Christ is blessed. We can stand beside one another and encourage one another to do this. It's going to become a bigger deal in our lifetimes. A new report this week said that 15% of Americans identify themselves as having no religion, which has doubled in just 18 years. 25% do not identify themselves with Christianity. Many who do don't attend church. We are in a time where we can share our faith like never before...and we will experience real resistance to it. We need to be here for each other to help when we find ourselves in trouble because of the Gospel.

But the biggest and best truth is that God turned the world upside down totally in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Him, we can be free from sin. Through Him, we can become different people, people who see the world for what it is and realize that God's plans, as crazy as they seem, are better than human wisdom. Through Him, we can have eternal life and enjoy life here and now. Stay in touch with God in prayer and trust Him to lead you. Give Him the benefit of the doubt when it seems His wisdom is foolish. He will never steer you wrong. He may not give you a stable bank account or job security or all the luxuries of the world, but He will give you peace. In the midst of the turmoil of our times, if you turn to Him, He will be your compass and make sure that you are always right-side-up in our upside-down world. Let's pray.