

January 11th: The Upside Down Kingdom

Welcome friends, to our new series called Kingdom Economics–this is a series that we put together to combine our annual Stewardship Campaign with the conversations that our Social Justice Book Group has been having surrounding faith and economic justice. That means that over the seven weeks, we’re learning about all things related to money, resources, and how to build a better community using those gifts. The Bible has a lot to say about these topics, because God is fundamentally interested in a more equitable world, and we get to be a part of that important work. So if one of your New Year's resolutions is to work on a better relationship with money, or you’re unsure of how to use what you already have–this is the series for you.

Before we jump into our text and find some wisdom for our daily lives, let’s take a moment to pray together.

Jesus our Teacher, in your inaugural sermon, you revealed the true purpose of your ministry: an upside down kingdom. Through your words and actions, you demonstrated what it looks like to prioritize the marginalized, lift up the vulnerable, and care for the weak. This is why you came to us, and this is why we gather in your name today. We are eager to learn how we can live in the revolutionary community, so open our ears this morning to the truth that you have for us. Challenge us to listen with our whole hearts, so that our lives can reflect your love. Amen.

Last week we kicked off this series by dumping out a big pile of monopoly money and pretending that we had the power to decide how all of the money in the world should be used–we funded housing for everyone, enough food to keep people fed, public transit, healthcare, clean water, animal care, and more. Some of you wanted to distribute the money equally, but a lot more of you wanted to distribute the money according to need–you argued that people with greater need should get a larger share. It was a fun exercise, and I think it gave each of us something to think about as it relates to our resources and the shared responsibility of building a better world.

However, this week, we're not playing pretend—we're going to dive deeper into our actual economic reality. We're going to take a closer look at what the financial status of our world actually is, because it's probably very different from what we would hope or imagine. And unfortunately, the truth is that humanity has created a far less equal world than the one we built with monopoly money—we're living in a system that is far more extreme and far more harmful than we might think.

To get a better picture of what we're dealing with, let's check out some data from the 2025 Global Wealth Report, conducted by UBS Financial Services, formerly known as Union Bank of Switzerland. In this report, UBS focused their analysis on the world's 3.8 billion adults—and quantified how much wealth was concentrated in the hands of individuals and households.

Here's the main takeaway of that analysis: although the world's wealth may look like it fits neatly into a pyramid—with some wealth at the top, but a majority shared with the masses—that could not be farther from the truth.

Here's what the pyramid actually shows:

- The bottom 40% of the world, 1.6 billion adults, have less than \$10,000 each, totaling just 0.6% of the total wealth in the world
- The next 41%, another 1.6 billion adults, have between \$10,000 and \$100,000, which is still only 12% of the total wealth in the world
- Overall, about 82% of the world's adults lay claim to 12.6% of the money, while 18% of the world's adults possess almost 88% of total resources
- At the very top, 60 million adults, which is only 1.6% of the world's adult population, holds 48% of the world's wealth. That's almost 50% of the world's resources concentrated in the hands of a very small elite. If we had 100 people in this room, and all the money in the world, 1 or 2 people would own half—leaving the other half for the other 98 or 99 people. Isn't that INSANE?!¹

¹ "Global Wealth Report 2025,"

<https://elements.visualcapitalist.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/global-wealth-report-09072025.pdf>

As you might expect, wealth is concentrated along racial and geographic lines—with North American and European individuals holding significantly more wealth than their African, South American, and Asian counterparts. And within seemingly wealthy nations like the United States, there is evidence of a growing wealth gap between the richest citizens and the working class. In 2022, the Survey of Consumer Finances found that black families were twice as likely as white families to have no wealth—meaning, zero or negative assets. While the average white family has a net worth of \$282,310, the average latino family has a net worth of \$62,120 and the average black family has a net worth of only \$44, 100. Race also plays a factor in the growing home ownership gap, with 75% of white Americans owning a home, while only 45% of black Americans can say the same. As of 2025, the richest 10% of Americans own two thirds of the total wealth.²

But those are just numbers—let’s see some visuals. Here’s the contrast between two neighborhoods in Brazil, two very different living conditions in Dubai, and the juxtaposition of homelessness and wealth in Los Angeles.

And that’s just a small snapshot of the economic inequality, we’d be here all day if I listed more examples and showed more images of this disparity. But why, WHY, is the world like this? Why has the gap between the very rich and everyone else been allowed to grow so large?

Well, the simple answer is that humanity has created a system that thrives on exploitation. In every century and economic system, unchecked greed drives certain individuals to consolidate power and influence based on the labor and skills of the masses. In the 21st century, we’ve allowed corporations to purchase the political process—effectively buying fewer regulations and therefore increasing their bottom line. That’s why we have people going hungry and homeless while Elon Musk is on track to be a trillionaire. It’s not innovation, it’s not business acumen, it’s avarice and gluttony.

² “Wealth Inequality in the United States,” inequality.org, <https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/>

It's a system where the people who have determined that they will never have enough abuse the people who actually do not have enough.

But here's the million dollar question: why should this matter to us as Christians?

Why talk about this persistent inequality as something deeply connected to our faith and ethics?

Simply put, this economic inequality mattered to Jesus. Centuries before the development of modern capitalism, our most trusted teacher and spiritual guide talked about money and financial injustice more than almost any other topic—a large portion of the four Gospels is deeply concerned with the physical and theological reality of the poor and disenfranchised. In his own time, Jesus saw how this same phenomenon happened in the Roman Empire: a few powerful people lived in luxury while almost everyone else suffered in poverty. And like our current system, this wasn't a mistake—it was intentional. It was a carefully constructed hierarchy, enforced by a brutal military and a distant political elite. The pyramid of inequality was built on purpose, because it suited the egos and needs of the ruling class.

In his book, *The Unjust Steward: Wealth, Poverty, and the World Today*, writer and theologian Miguel Escobar elaborates on this ancient culture with these words from the scholar Helen Rhee, “the tension between the wealthy landed minority and the peasant landless majority goes back to the late monarchical period, but throughout the Second Temple period and especially during Herod's rule, the situation grew increasingly worse through the continuing economic oppression and confiscation of the land by the rich and powerful. Creation of huge estates through the exploitation of the land and through mortgage interest produced a growing number of landless tenants or hired laborers in the very land they had once owned.”³

³ Miguel Escobar, *The Unjust Steward: Wealth, Poverty, and the Church Today* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 2022), 9

Escobar continues, “Roman society was marked by stark inequality with an imperial and aristocratic elite (1-3 percent), a middle group with moderate surplus resources (7-15 percent), and a vast group of ‘the poor’ who were either stable near subsistence (22-27 percent), at subsistence (30-40 percent), or below subsistence and therefore lacking necessary food, shelter and clothing (25-28 percent).

It is therefore estimated that 75-90 percent of the Roman world lived close to subsistence level—near, at, or below—and were struggling for survival on a daily basis.”⁴

That brings us to our passage for this morning. Today’s scripture reading comes from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, in the early days of walking with the disciples and teaching in cities and villages. This text is one of his first recorded public speeches, and it sets the tone for the rest of his journey. There is so much that we could say about the Sermon on the Mount, it’s one of the most studied topics by biblical scholars, Christian theologians, and pastors around the globe. It’s a passage that we could spend weeks, even months, covering on its own—that’s how rich and important it is. But today, we’re just going to focus on this overall vision that he sets out for his disciples and larger audience.

This section is called “the Beatitudes,” because it lists the people that God has blessed—in God’s kingdom, these are the individuals and groups that God deems the most worthy of honor. But it’s not who the world might expect. Instead of admiring the wealthy and influential, Jesus tells the crowd that the poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the persecuted are the real heroes of God’s kingdom. They’re the ones who God lifts up and praises. They’re the ones that inherit the earth and are called the children of God.

This is Jesus’ mission statement: here’s here to turn the pyramid upside down. He’s come to earth with a purpose, and that purpose is to flip what the world considers good on its head, and as a result of that shift, Jesus is choosing to ally

⁴ Escobar, *The Unjust Steward*, 22

himself with the marginalized and suffering. He tells his fellow Judeans: empire might determine their current circumstances, but a change is coming—God has a better plan. A plan that prioritizes justice. A plan that is rooted in equity. A plan that makes space for the lost and lonely. This was definitely radical in Jesus’ time, and it’s still radical today.

It’s still controversial to speak out against injustice—it’s still dangerous to critique people and institutions that have a vested interest in making sure our current system continues.

In the 20th century, a Peruvian theologian and professor by the name of Gustavo Gutierrez looked at passages like the Sermon on the Mount and argued that our holy scripture demonstrates what he called God’s “preferential option for the poor,” meaning that all three parts of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, have a special love and concern for the oppressed and disenfranchised. Throughout the Bible and Jesus’ ministry, we can trace a divine bias for the vulnerable and marginalized, and the aim of God’s justice is to liberate those people from our sinful human systems. Gutierrez is now recognized as the author of “liberation theology,” which has become a core part of Catholic social teaching and the practices of other Christian denominations.

But before it was incorporated into mainstream theology, liberation theology was seen by many in power as divisive and even heretical—as it went against some of the popular rhetoric found in movements like “the prosperity gospel,” as well as some more conservative factions of the Catholic Church who called it “too political.” Critics claimed that it took more inspiration from the writings of Karl Marx than it did from the Bible, and likened its goal of economic and cultural justice to an unrealistic utopia rather than a promised scriptural reality.

But I don’t see that. I don’t think those arguments hold up. And I’ll tell you why.

Jesus is very clear that this upside down, liberating Kingdom is not optional—it’s the very foundation of everything else he will do. It can’t be

separated from the healing that he does, or his critiques of the religious elite, or even his sacrificial death. This upside down kingdom is the point of Jesus coming to be with us, and he was willing to die for us to achieve it. So if we look to Jesus as our ultimate authority for faith and life, but we let our human, modern biases against certain philosophies or beliefs determine how we see and experience his teachings, we are doing it all wrong. If we superimpose our broken policies and corrupt systems on top of Jesus, we will never see him clearly. If we try to fit Jesus into our modern narrow definitions and categories, we will always miss the mark.

And that's because this upside down kingdom was meant to exist outside of our human imagination. It's a vision that could only come from the divine. It's a model that is impossible for us to achieve on our own. That's why we resist it, that's why we need Jesus to help us realize it more fully. We need Jesus to teach us a better way. It might not always make us comfortable, and it might challenge us, but it will change us for good.

So let's close by applying what we've learned, and preparing to take this upside down kingdom into our week. Let's go back to that pyramid that I showed at the beginning of our time together—and let's dream a little bit, let's see the world through Jesus' eyes.

What would happen if we turned our financial reality upside down? What would our society look like if power, influence, and resources were concentrated in the hands of the many, instead of the few? Who would we look up to and admire? Whose voice would be lifted up, and whose voice would be silenced? What would be different about our communities and nations? How would our governments and civic organizations operate if we prioritized the groups that Jesus talks about? How would the lives of our neighbors be more liberated and just?

I think these questions give us a lot to think about, so I encourage you to take some time this week to pray and meditate on this topic—maybe even reread this passage a few times and let this vision of a world turned upside down

digest in your brain and heart. Let it sink in a little bit, let it shift your perspective.

Because my friends, God's Kingdom is coming to earth, as it is in heaven. Jesus has promised us that his life and death are bringing us closer to this reality, whether we can see it right now or not. And this is good news for all of us who are part of a system of exploitation and greed. This is good news for all of us who are ready for equity and justice to have the final say.

So let's join Jesus in turning our world upside down.

Amen.