

The Upside-Down Kingdom

By Bobby Schuller

Yesterday I posted a video on Instagram that got a lot of attention and in the video, I said please never say this phrase ever again. And the phrase is “God will never give you more than you can handle.” Who has experienced something in life that was more than they could handle, just raise your hand? All right, look around. Who can handle life? Who can handle the loss of a child? Who can handle a miscarriage or infertility? Who can handle cheating or a divorce or a horrible breakup or the death of someone you love that you spent your whole life building a relationship with? Who can handle that!?

The good news is someone can, but that someone is not me. It is Jesus Christ. Without Him, I cannot handle life. I cannot handle my sin! I can't handle my struggles. I can't handle my temper. I can't handle my bitterness or my envy or my bad self-talk. I can't handle my discouragement. I can't handle life! But He can handle it.

And in life, we teach through the gospel that you're not meant to handle life alone. We need loving, godly friendships. We need a church that's full of good people. We need the scriptures to nourish us and most

of all, we need the Holy Spirit to keep us going through the tough times that we face.

One of the greatest temptations, especially if you live where we live, in the richest county, in the richest state, in the richest country in the world, it is a great temptation here in Irvine, California the safest city in the country, did you know that? It is a great temptation here to live life for the world's glory rather than the glory that is offered in the kingdom of God. Now we come from a Reformed tradition, and we say that the purpose of life is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, and that is true.

But don't forget that God also offers glory to His disciples, but it's not the glory the world offers. You don't believe me? Well don't you remember what Paul said in his epistle, I believe to the Colossians? Jesus Christ, hope of glory. What does that mean? What does it mean that Jesus Christ is the hope of glory? I believe it means that the world offers its kind of glory, the same kind its always offered – trophies, fame, followers, people watching you, people clapping for you. And then there's another kind of glory, the kind that comes when we stand before the throne of God and give an account of our lives. Where we look back at what we actually did in God's kingdom, and what kind of a difference we made. And when we are more like the sheep and less like the goats.

When we look back and realize that even though we were imperfect and we sinned and we made mistakes, we lived with our heart completely for the Lord. When we look back and understood, most of the time when

we were leading, meant to serve, not to be served. It meant to give credit rather than to take credit. It meant to take responsibility rather than to cast blame. We will look back on a life well lived, and in that season, we will glory. Can I get an amen from the saints in the house? That God wants a great life for you! But to live that kind of eternal life, you must walk a narrow path that goes upstream, that's different than what the world says.

The message of the world has always been the same – me, me, me, me, my, my, my, my, my, look at me! But the kingdom of God is a different message. Lay your life down. Serve. Love. And that is where life is, when the Holy Spirit moves us in the direction of hurting people, serving others, glorying in the Lord. That's where it's at. You have such an amazing destiny before you, but your destiny only comes when you lay your down your need for the world's glory and live your life for the glory of the Lord, which will be your glory.

Okay. I still remember a vivid image. There is the old world, like Europe, and then there's the old, old world, like the Middle East. Europe is just like a little old, like a couple thousand years old. But the Middle East is like older than history.

In the Middle East, especially in the flatlands, there are these things called tels: t-e-l, like Tel Aviv. A tel is an amazing thing. I never knew something like this could exist. It's a mountain made of dead people. When you see a tel, very often you will see a flat plain, and then

sticking out of the ground, there will be this very odd, almost perfectly circular shaped hill. You know what that is? It's a tel. It's a layer cake of history. Basically, what happened was something like six thousand years ago, a bunch of settlers built a village there. And then a Viking-type or horse archer-type came through, destroyed everything, killed everybody, but there was a good source of water there. And so, some other settlers came and, well they built on top of it. And then they got killed, and then somebody else built something on top of it. And then they got killed, and then pretty soon this layer of civilizations becomes the only high ground in a valley, which becomes a great defense, and then becomes a city. It's called a tel.

So if you could cut a tel in half, you would see that there might be as many as 50 or 60 cities, villages or civilizations. And the more that were there, the more valuable the spot comes, because why? Anybody? Cause its higher. So it reinforces itself! It's amazing, in America, the idea of a tel is kind of disturbing and something we've never seen, but they're all over the Middle East. And many cities are tel-something because they're built on a hill, like Tel-Aviv.

Well, one interesting tel, one I'll never forget, was one called Beit She'an. In the Middle East, it was the capital of the Decapolis, which are the ten major pagan cities in Jesus' day. I remember when Hannah and I went there with one of the best tour leaders I ever met. He was a Jewish Indiana Jones. His parents were German, and his family escaped

Germany during the Holocaust and reestablished themselves in Israel. He had a cowboy hat, still has it, thick German accent. Was famous, had a found a gold ship or something and that got him tenured at the Hebrew university, I believe.

Anyway, I remember when we went, we had a private tour from this guy, wonderful man, and he walked us through this tel, which what you're seeing here is the Roman ruins, and that was sort of the last.. well maybe there were more, but anyway, this is the Roman ruins, and he was walking us through telling us about Rome. One of the most beautiful theaters were there, and all sorts of structures, and he walked us through and he showed us everything, and this man was a committed, I believe, very committed Jewish man, and he brought us to the temple, and he began to describe it. He said look at this temple. Wow. Marble arches, and a ceiling, and there would have been flags here and look at these steps, and colonnades and there would have been candles here, and this is where the parades would have come in. And you sort of walk up these very grand steps, and it's a ruin, but you kind of picture it in your mind. And he goes, and then you come through this big hallway, and then you come into the house.

And then he's like, and then come in this area, and here's this thick like Hebrew German accent, he's like what do you see in here? We walk in and this little room, I don't know the real dimensions because this was about 15 years ago, but I want to say it was like.. do you

remember this story, Hannah? Maybe six feet around, something like that. And he goes 'in this little room, was this small room, and in the small room, the small altar, and on the altar, a little god. Big temple, little god.' I never forgot that line: big temple, little god. Big, grand, beautiful on the outside, on the inside a little nothing. Big temple, little god. Man, if there was something that describes what the Roman empire became in its epitome, it was a big temple with a little god. Romans were all about glory. They were all about looking great on the outside; trophies. They actually did not care as much about wealth. They cared about achievements, winning victories, battles, things like the Olympics, strength, power, fame, glory, notching your name into history.

There was an old saying by the Romans that a man dies twice. The first time is in his last breath, the second time is the last time someone speaks his name. The idea being that if we can become glorious and famous, that in some way, we can achieve a kind of immortality. That even though we sleep cold and breathless in our graves, someone out there still remembers us and still speaks our name. I don't know about you, but that is not the kind of eternal life I want. I want an eternal life that is full of glory! I want an eternal life that is full of song and meals and festivals and projects and work and friendship. I want a kind of eternal life that is only achievable by the very strong name and work of Jesus Christ. It is the only way we can approach the throne of God boldly is not in our own power, not in our own good works, in our

achievements, but only by the forgiving grace of Christ crucified can we come before His throne beloved sons and daughters, and to know that the glory of eternal life wasn't even earned by us. It simply was received as a free gift. Can I get an amen? There is no life in the kind of glory the world offers. How many celebrities, how many super models, how many rock stars have to tell you 'I am depressed, I want to kill myself, I don't like my life, I don't like what I've achieved, this has brought me nothing,' before we regular mortals will learn and stop wanting that! How long!? How long!?

I don't know about you, but I refuse to believe that that is the only kind of full life a person can receive today. God has such a simpler, better, more glorious thing in store for you. Don't get me wrong, man, look I love rock stars, I love artists; and I always think that the famous artists are like.. there's an old saying that Jews are like everybody else only more so. I always liked that saying. I heard a rabbi say that once.

In many ways, that's what celebrities are, aren't they? Many of them are like all of us, it's just more so. They're able to show us what would happen if we got everything we ever wanted. If we're in one of those lucky few, what would happen if I got everything I ever wanted? Well, I'd be sad because I would realize that what I wanted didn't give me anything. What's even worse than that, there's nothing left to want. There's nothing left to work for. Not in the kingdom of God.

You want to hear something hilarious? I haven't started my sermon yet. I better get going. I have twelve minutes and forty-six seconds. I can do this.

Okay, the world offers, here's what the world offers, all right? If you do it all yourself, if you work like crazy, if you neglect your kids and your friends, and you engage in shameless self-promotion, and you do it for years, there's a one in a million chance you might become rich or super famous, and even then you won't be happy. Okay? That's what the world offers. That's called big temple, little god. Here's what Christ offers: love me with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your might, and love your neighbor as yourself, and you will inherit eternal life. That sounds a lot better to me. That sounds like little temple, big God. You want to know little temple, big God? Look at my grandma. Little temple, big God.

When the Lord dwells within us, we age like wine, huh? We age like wine. Every year we get older, we become more full of spiritual power and life and godliness. But when you have a big temple, little god, every year you get older, it's a sad holding on to what used to be. That's not what I want. That's not what God has for you. You are God's treasure. He loves you. And all the things that God teaches us to do, is for our benefit. It's not like He's doing it because we ought to because that's the moral thing to do. It is, but it's also the best way to live life. It's the best way to live. Isn't that good news? That's good news.

So we get to Stephen. Last week we talked about Stephen, the first martyr of the church, and we saw it more from Stephen's perspective. You might remember that in the book of Acts, the 12 apostles needed to serve the widows and the orphans, but they were too busy. They said, 'shall we wait tables?' So they asked if there was anybody that was available, and there were seven that were willing to wait tables for widows. One of them was a guy named Stephen. Didn't want to perform miracles, didn't want to be a great preacher or an evangelist, just wanted to be available to serve widows. And he said I'll do it. And you remember what the Bible says? Says that out of all of them, he was full of spiritual power. And even though he thought he was just being called to serve widows, he was being called to attest, to see who really understood the kingdom of God.

And in his obedience, full of the spirit, he performed great miracles, and many were coming into the kingdom because of his preaching, even though that's not what he signed up for.

When Stephen was killed, there was a man holding the cloaks of his killers. His name was Sha'ul, Saul, we say in English. Just a little digression. I'm just going to go back just a little, I'm running out of time. There's a famous rabbi named Gamaliel. If you ask any Orthodox Jew today, do you know the name Gamaliel, they will know that name. One of the great sages. He was the grandson of perhaps the most important Hebrew, Jewish rabbi, Hillel. In Jesus' day, there's two schools fighting

each other, the very legalistic Shammai group, and the more sort of love your neighbor Hillel group.

In Acts chapter 5, some of the apostles are brought into the Sanhedrin, of which Gamaliel is a member, and when they want to kill the apostles, Gamaliel says.. you remember what he says? Don't kill them, why would you kill them? He says either this is man's work, and if it is it'll fizzle out, or this is God's work, and if it's God's work, should we fight against God? And even if we did, could we stop it? Interesting huh? Good man, it sounds like to me. He had a disciple. You remember what disciple is? A disciple does not mean someone who believes in Jesus' name. I mean it is that for us, but in its context, a disciple is a seminary student; someone who is preparing to become a rabbi. His disciple was a kid named Sha'ul; a kid that was about Jesus' age, roughly the same age.

Sha'ul watches his rabbi Gamaliel, not cast judgement like the other members of the Sanhedrin but cast mercy. That was his mentor. Later, when Stephen is being tried in the Sanhedrin, why is Saul there? Do you remember? Because he's a protégé of Gamaliel, who's a member of the Sanhedrin. So, he's like an intern, you could say. Like an intern at the Sanhedrin. He's not a member, but he's standing there, and that's why he's the one holding coats.

And when Stephen dies, and Saul watches this, holding cloaks, the last words from Stephen, do you remember what they are? "Father, do

not hold this sin against them.” You cannot watch a man die ruthlessly and viciously and unjustly, and then his last words are words of grace, mercy and love for the people that are killing him. You cannot watch that and not be a little changed.

Tradition, Augustin’s teachings and many other traditions of the church is that that’s when the mantle of Stephen transferred to Sha’ul, to Saul, that something went inside of his body, the seed. It was planted in his body, and from that point on, even though after that he becomes worse, not better, he also begins to viciously attack people, I believe that there is this thing that as he persecutes Christians, he starts to get the same treatment. Throwing Christians in jail and beating them, and they’re saying God, forgive Saul, he doesn’t know what he’s doing. God, forgive Saul, forgive Saul, forgive Saul.

We don’t know, I mean the Bible doesn’t say that, but it’s easy to imagine it, isn’t it? It’s easy to know that the character of a human being can only endure so much mercy before it becomes soft.

And that’s what happens. Sha’ul, Saul is on the road to Damascus to see some more Christians, and Jesus knocks him off of his horse. Let me just pause really quick. This idea of a seed being planted through your obedience is so important. I think I told you this story once. My grandpa Schuller said that in the kingdom of God, when it comes to preachers, there’s some people who plant the seed, there are some who tend the seed so that it grows, and there are some that reap the harvest.

And I said well, which one are you? He said I'm none of them. He said there's also someone who needs to till the soil so the seed can get in. That's what I do. In other words, he was saying I soften people up. I soften people up for the gospel, so that when they hear these deeper teachings, they can receive.

It's hard not to imagine that when Saul was persecuting Christians, and they were loving him, forgiving him and giving him mercy, that he wasn't getting a little softened up. And that the seed that Stephen planted in his heart wasn't growing.

All that to say Saul is knocked off of the horse and he's converted, and he's struck blind, he hears the voice of Jesus Christ and he says Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Christians? No, He says "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Notice how Jesus makes no differentiation between Himself and the church. Or, you might even say Jesus, in this case, makes no differentiation between Himself and suffering people, people who are suffering injustice. There's no difference. Why do you persecute me? That's not a leap, by the way, to say that Jesus does not make any differentiation between Himself and the suffering. Jesus just says it plainly.

In Matthew 25, He says, "when I was hungry;" first of all, He separates sheep and goats. I was at the fair recently with Haven and Cohen. I was like Haven look at this sheep! It looked just like a sheep. And the guy goes that's not a sheep, that's a goat! Let me tell you, if you

chop a goat's horns off, and people do it all the time, I cannot tell the difference between a goat and a sheep. There's one way you can tell: it's in the personality. It's in the personality. Sheep are at peace, they stay together, they're under the care of the shepherd. When you're with sheep, you lead sheep, but when you're with goats, you have to drive goats. You have to have dogs and you have to like walk behind them and it's almost like herding cats. And there's an old saying that if it can't hold water, it can't hold a goat. There's a funny picture of like ten goats in a tree. Goats are always falling off of stuff, getting in trouble. So this is an image that a lot of people would have got. Like they look exactly the same, but their character is different.

And so Jesus says that in the end times, when you stand before the seat of judgment, He'll look at the sheep and He'll say when I was hungry, you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was naked you clothed me. When I was a stranger, you invited me in. Enter into my kingdom. And they'll say well when did we feed you and give you something to drink? He said when you did it to the least of these, you did it for me.

Can I tell you another story? This is specifically for parents and grandparents and caretakers. I remember once as a dad, reading this story in my quiet time and thinking, Lord, I have no time to feed the hungry and to give drink to the thirsty and to clothe the naked. I've got kids. And right as I was sort of saying that, in my heart, my son, who

was like a little baby, came up to me, completely naked and said daddy?
I'm hungry. Let that be a grace to you.

It doesn't have to be homeless people. Sometimes we're called as parents in a season to serve our kids. Our kids are hungry, our kids, or the people if you're a caretaker, our kids are thirsty. Very often, unfortunately, they're naked. And you've got to clothe them. All right? But I would for sure say the least of these.

And can I just say as someone who has spent a lot of time working with the homeless, that so many of those homeless people, you just ask where is their family? An ounce of prevention is a pound of cure.

All right, and I'll finish with this. I believe that when we learn to trust Jesus Christ with our actions, especially in regards to loving our enemies, to caring for those who are in need, to living an unhurried life, to not be always grinding out for glory, but when we do that, that we will begin now, not just when we die, to inherit a kind of life.

Very quickly, here's some things. Our world is so loud and everybody's talking. In order to serve your neighbor sometimes, we need more people that are willing to actively listen. Listen to people. That means when they say something to you, say it back to them and keep saying it until they go exactly! When they say that, they know they've been heard.

Paul tells us that when somebody's gossiping about us, or saying bad things about us, but we love them, he throws Proverbs at us, and

shows us that when we love our neighbor, like if you want to get somebody back that's your enemy, love them and it'll be like hot coals. Now that can either mean it's like you're really zinging them, or there's an old expression in the old world, you put hot coals on their head, meaning that their fire and their hearth went out. I always say it wrong. And so they carry the coals on their heads. That's actually a gift. When you love your enemies, you're either meeting a need or you're zinging them. I'm not really sure, but it's one of those things. But practically its very useful.

Give credit when you're in a team where credit is due. Try not to take credit for work people have done. Take responsibility for your mistakes even when somebody else has a part of it.

Most importantly, say thank you to people, even though they should have done it. This is especially true of the people you live with. You cannot say thank you to the people you're married to, or your parent, or to your parents, you can't say thank you too much. I have never heard anyone say, 'stop saying thank you to me.' It's too much! Stop appreciating me so much.

Very often we think, well they're supposed to do that. Why would I thank them? Maybe it's an employee or a co-worker. Well, because you're giving them dignity when you do that, and you're appreciating the work that they did. They didn't have to do it as well as they did. They didn't have to do it on time. Thank people.

So you see in life, that's a few Bobby tips. There are a million other things you can do, and part of that is studying the scripture and understanding it, but when we learn to walk, when we learn to walk in Jesus' way, we're learning to walk the best, most fruitful, joyous kind of life we can live. We have to get it in our heads that what the world offers is a lie! Big temple, little god. But what Jesus offers us is maybe little temple, big God. Improbable person doing impossible things. A person who is not qualified, doesn't have the experience, doing amazing things for God. That's what God wants for you, but you have to do it His way. Trust me in this. Try it for like 60 days, okay? Just try it and watch how your life will get better.

Father, we thank you. We trust our lives to you. Loving our enemies, serving people in need is one of the greatest ways we can prove to you that we trust you with our lives. We pray that you'd forgive us and fill us with your Holy Spirit wherever we are. Break chains of sin or addiction or depression or grief or envy or all the many things that keep us stuck in self-absorption, and help us to live the unhurried, joy-filled lives that can only be found in your kingdom. We ask it in the very strong name of Jesus Christ, amen.