

More Than Conquerors—How?

[A Super Kingdom of Superheroes: Reversals in the Upside-Down Kingdom]

Text: Luke 22:24-28; Luke 4:1ff

By Bob Young

Introduction

Superheroes. How are you going to work out that theme in the Bible? Not hard—the word appears in the Bible—*hupernikomen*. Superhero, more than conquerors, Rom. 8:37.

You know about superheroes, right? Mighty Mouse, Roy Rogers, Sky King, Lone Ranger, Matt Dillon. Take the impossible, make it possible. Take the improbable, reverse the fortunes. Escape at the last minute, overcome, escape the trap. This is the story of Jesus in Luke.

Study tonight in Luke. Reversals. Good Samaritan, grateful Samaritan, prodigal son vs. elder brother, Lazarus and rich man, Pharisee and publican. Reversals reflect principles of greatness. High to be brought low, low to be made high. Acts 17:6, turned world upside down. Reminds me of a popular children's song: "I'm Inright, Outright, Upright, downright happy all the time."

Our subject tonight is the Upside-Down Kingdom, but our focus is on the king of the upside-down kingdom. Introduced by the reading from Luke 22:24ff.

Among Gentile pagans, world, society, even our culture...authority is used, abused, misused, lordship and superiority are valued, better than you, positional authority.

These people are given titles, Good Ruler, or take titles, or call themselves good rulers, but may not be so seen by followers.

We are today familiar with this world--selfish, individualistic, each for self. Rights without responsibilities. Stretch limits, take advantage. If Christians are not careful, we adopt such thinking and actions, but this is the method of superheroes. Superheroes are different. Superheroes not need to be on top. "Underdog." We live in a different kind of kingdom, with a different kind of king. Superhero.

Characteristics of Superheroes—ability to solve problems, ability to protect others, more powerful than usual, more intelligent, on side of justice, superior.

Will help everyone equally.

All are equal. All matter. Lowest is as important as highest. Young-old. Educated-uneducated. Rich-poor, temporary college student--permanent members, top-bottom, master-servant, teachers-students, elders-members.

Normally, v. 27, the greater is the one at the table. Note the rhetorical question. This cannot be an accurate description of the kingdom, for Jesus Christ came serving. Note the parallels in Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45. Jesus' willingness to serve, to suffer, to give, are evidence of his servant heart. Servant leadership. His willingness to give self for others. In this kingdom (vs. 29), all are equal.

Exists to serve. Does not focus on self, but on serving others.

Service. Those at the top serve and submit to all the others. When you get to the bottom, you have arrived at the top. Greatest is least, least is greatest. Lowly are exalted, greatest is last. To humble self is beginning of exaltation; to exalt self is to come to nothing. First are last, last are first. Imagine it, "I'm last, I'm last..." Emphasis in this upside-down kingdom is on service, ministry. Purpose of leaders, task of leaders. ad-ministry, to move others toward ministry, Eph. 4:11ff.

Finding is losing, losing is finding. Nonsensical by world's standards. Saving for self is losing and giving to others is receiving. Ac 20:35.

Does not focus on self.

Fellowship, koinonia. Church is family, but in one sense, more than family. To say family is incomplete, one-sided, only one facet.

Koinonia is togetherness, end of isolation, no Lone Ranger Christians. Not saved in isolation, not keep saved in isolation. No member isolated from others nor ignored when church is functioning normally. No

member should isolate self.

Mutuality is submission. Rethink Rom. 12:5. We belong to one another. Each submits to others, each seeks welfare of others. Must know, be known. Implies there is no human hierarchy. Mutuality means no manipulation, coercion, only willing service.

Mutuality is possible because in following example of Jesus Christ who served, we empty self, consider selves as nothing. Essence of this upside-down church is, "Can I give myself away?" How often? To how many? How much can I be like Jesus who is my example, Phil. 2:1-11.

Brings us to the text in Luke. Story of temptations of Jesus. Jesus may appear bigger than life. Superhero. If we follow a superhero, and are more than conquerors, what do we need to do? What are the greatest challenges before us? What is the example of our superhero. What are the greatest challenges facing us.

Audacious, to answer such a question for everyone. But, how do we need to change today? What are my, your, our greatest challenges today as part of the body of Christ. Excellent question. Excellent challenges, important question. Assigned topics are always an anxiety, and this was originally, when I first preached it, an assigned topic. What can I say about the next 8-10 years that will accurately reflect the future when I feel at a loss most days when asked about the remainder of the year? Inner turmoil, but must stay close to my heart. Ask yourself, what decisions are you making, what directions are you taking that reflect the way you sense the future? This is a different question than "What do you consider the three most important issues facing the church in the next few years? Issues are indeed challenging, but issues are generally superficial. I have watched the church for 1/3 of a century. Generally, there is an "issue of the year." In some places, "issue of the month." The great challenges before the church should sensitively sense the future, anticipate it, and be ready to respond to it even before it gets here.

As life goes on, I ask more frequently, "Is growing older bringing me closer to Jesus?" The problems of life are overwhelming, we may pray poorly, study superficially, live in relative isolation, and be preoccupied with burning issues which do not reflect the real challenges the church must take up if we are to be a vital relevant voice in our world. I bring you here some images which may communicate the direction I believe the church must go, the way I believe individual Christians must respond. I am guided in these reflections by a single story in the Synoptics, the temptation of Jesus in the desert (Mt. 4, Lk. 4, Mk. 1). The challenges I see are suggested by the temptation account and presented as opposing positions on a scale or balance. How can the church remain balanced in its attempt to communicate the message of Jesus accurately and spiritually, but with relevance to our secular world?

I. Shall we be relevant or real?

We must overcome the temptation to selfishness, Matt. 4, is this for us alone. Is Christianity solely for our own selfish use, do we turn stones to bread for us, is our diet balanced, is the message a spiritual one for a secular world. What food do we seek? Do not live by the secular standards. We cannot live by bread alone, while the spiritual man starves. Nor can we allow spiritual starvation for our friends, neighbors, and families when we hear this account correctly.

Perhaps the greatest challenge before us is biblical illiteracy. Bible knowledge has diminished in our society. Relativism questions the authority of the Bible; humanism questions the power of the Bible over mankind; post-modernism questions the inspiration of the Bible. We are called to relevance without selling out to a secular society. Amidst individualism, humanism, a focus on people and away from God, we must somehow reveal the God who loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of life.

Jesus' first temptation was to relevance: turn stones to bread. Meet personal needs. The modern church would like to do that. Feed all the hungry, but Jesus said the poor are always here. Deal with all the malnutrition, contaminated water, unclothed children, orphaned infants. Would love to answer the call to feed the hungry, save the starving, help the helpless, give hope to the hopeless in answer to physical needs.

But is the church not called to do something that will make an even greater difference in loves as we heal the sick, feed the hungry, and give hopeful meaning to suffering? When Jesus faced these questions, when

the challenge to relevance was issued in changing stones to bread, he clung to his mission and proclaimed the word. Human beings do not live by bread alone, although Jesus feeds the crowds in Matt. 14. In John 6, those who follow only for physical sustenance are upbraided.

One of the main sufferings of the church in this day is that of low self-esteem. We see ourselves as having little impact. We are busy, but not much changes. Efforts appear fruitless. Church attendance often decreases; low trust, irrelevance. How can we change?

Do not buy into the culture, but penetrate the culture with the ever-relevant message of Jesus Christ. The secular world says, "We can take care of self, we do not need God, church, Christian friends. We are in control. If not, we will work harder. The problem is not faith but competence. If sick, get competent doctor, if poor, get competent politician, if technical problem, get competent engineer, if war, competent negotiators. Temptation of church is to buy in, think we can fiddle with this/that, gizmos and gadgets, fix the church with the right preacher, right programs, but the problem is deeper.

Efficiency and control may be the aspirations of society, but loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship, lack of intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness, depression, uselessness still fill the hearts of millions in our success-oriented world. The challenge to relevance is not to succeed, but to succor. A moral/spiritual poverty underlies the facade of wealth, success, popularity, and power. The world wants to know, "Does anyone love me?" Is anyone going anywhere? Does anybody care? Will anybody stay home for me? Will anybody let me cry? Will anybody hold me and give me a sense of belonging?

Such questions must call us out of our selfishness and navel-gazing. Such must call us away from church programs just for us, and must call individual Christians away from their selfish stay at home activity to reach out in love. The challenge to relevance is not what can you do, accomplishments, results, but are you in love with Jesus? That will make us relevant. Do you know God? How is your heart? Will we succumb to the temptations to relevance and sell out, or will we seek the heart of God, radically, consistently, concretely? Will we pray, will we teach, will we live for Him by living for others.

II. Shall we be powerful or pliable?

We must overcome the temptation to strength.

The OT prophet wrote of the potter and clay; we sing have thine own way. History demonstrates the fallacy of the temptation to power in the Crusades, the Inquisition, and countless battles fought for religion. Will we always face the bane of too many chiefs and not enough Indians. The problem in the church, what we say or do may have little if anything to do with where people live. One of the great ironies in Christian history is that leaders constantly give in to temptation to power--political, military, economic, moral/spiritual; even though we continue to speak in the name of Jesus who did not cling to divine power, but emptied himself to become as we are. The temptation to consider power an apt instrument in the proclamation of the Gospel may be the greatest of all. Just another study series, but no awareness of seeking spirituality. Just another program, but no awareness of people. We keep hearing from others, and from self, that having power--provided you use it in service of God and others--is a good thing. Where can we read that in the Bible? The crusade, inquisitions, enslavements, episcopal palaces and splendid cathedrals, opulent seminaries, and some of our own buildings, the church is more concerned with political influence than spiritual salvation. The major cause of waves in church history is that power ruptures God's people.

Why is strength, power so tempting. Because it offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It is easier to be God than to love God. Easier to control others than to love others (parenting). Easier to own life than to love life.

III. Will we be spectacular or servants?

We must overcome the temptation to the spectacular.

The church exists as a community of wounded if it is anything at all like the first century church. Living in such a community, we must understand the challenge to caring fellowship differently.

The second temptation of Jesus was to do something spectacular, to win applause, to call attention. Let the angels catch you. But Jesus was no spiritual stunt man. No need to prove self, not come to walk on coals,

swallow fire, put the hand in the lion's mouth. Do not test God.

Too often today the church, individual Christians, want to be spectacular, to be noticed. It is easy to see the prevalence of individualism among ministers. How many applied for the big church, how many for the small church? Small church in northern Michigan, how many applied. Fort Gibson, 1987, over 80 applied. Realistically, not many have the vast repertoire of skills to show off, but must still feel that the spiritual journey is something we do solo. Illustration: a man wants to do something for the church, well my yard needs mowing.

German angst refers to free-floating anxiety. There is no free-floating service, no free-floating spirituality that accurately reflects the life of our Lord, the spirit of our Savior. Stardom and individual heroism, obvious in our competitive society, are not alien to the church, and the church must accept the challenge to be remade through rethinking into the image of Jesus, Matt. 20:28; Rom. 12:1-2.

We keep forgetting that Jesus sends the twelve out by pairs, Matt. 10. We go two by two. We cannot bring good news on our own. We are called to proclaim the gospel in community, Matt. 18:19-20. We must restore the nature of fellowship. Discover over and over how hard it is to be faithful to Jesus when I am alone. Need prayers, those who speak about the spiritual task before me, challenges to stay pure in mind, heart, body. It is Jesus who heals, not we ourselves. Jesus speaks the words of truth, we are only instruments; Jesus is Lord, not any person, least of all me. Service comes from the bottom up, Matt. 20; Lk. 22. Only bring the world to Christ when we clearly make visible the redeeming power of God together. We do not come in our own name, not in things spectacular, not to call attention to self. We are governed by God, let him control. We do not control. Be vulnerable. Illustration: afraid that if you know who I really am you might not like me anymore.

Church is place where we know and are known; care and are cared for; accept and are accepted; forgive and are forgiven; love and are loved. A place to belong, be secure. A place of healing, reconciliation, life giving. Not from us, but from him. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need care as much as we are able to care for others. The mystery of ministry is that we are called to make our own limited, very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited, unconditional love of God. We must learn the mutuality of the healing community, as demonstrated in AA, ACA, a confession community daring to search for healing.

Conclusion

The question still comes down to one: Do you love me? Mt. 20:21; Gen. 3:5. History of the church is history of people tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. It is not easy to let go of power, dismantle the hierarchy. Powerlessness and humility in spiritual life do not refer to those with no spine, to let others make all the decisions, run over us. Refers to people so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides, always trusting him to find life abundant. Thinking, speaking, acting in the name of Jesus. Freeing humanity from death, opening the way to eternal life.

These--the choice between the secular and the spiritual which tempts us to selfishness, the choice between stardom and servanthood which tempts us to the spectacular, the choice between power and pliability which tempts us to strength--are not the only challenges, but they are indeed three great challenges. Very difficult. Perhaps most capable of returning the church to a path that will once again bring vibrancy, vitality, and growth. A church like Jesus, a church like that of which we read in Acts. A church that seeks relevance in reality, that seeks spirituality over secular values. A church that seeks service more than stardom, because if your selfish world, genuine servants are so rare that they are spectacular (noticeable, visible, seeable). A church that depends on God for its power and might. A church that is not concerned with being strong, but spiritual. Able to worship, able to save in a godly way that matters eternally.

The task of the church is not to make some little contribution to solving the pains and tribulations of our time, but it is to identify and announce the ways Jesus leads us from spiritual slavery into a new land of freedom. We have the arduous task of responding to personal struggles, family conflicts, national calamities, people who seek power-position-prominence, international tensions. Respond with an articulate faith in the real presence of God who calls us to serve spiritual needs.

Respond with faith that will seize the moment, this moment. Opportunity for obedience, baptism, new hearts. Carpe diem. Kairos time. Opportunities, challenges. Spiritual formation, the mind of Christ. Won't you respond, won't you come.