**UPSIDE DOWN & INSIDE OUT**

***Paradoxes Christians Must Live***

***#4 – Last Is First***

Do you know what the “wagon wheel effect” is? Have you ever seen the propellers of an airplane start up? At first you see them going clockwise, but suddenly they appear as if they are rotating counter-clockwise. How can that be? You can see the same scenario on tires with certain hubcaps. At first they seem to be moving the car forward, then when they reach a certain speed they look as if they are actually going backward. It’s an optical illusion. It appears unreal, but it is in fact very real. What seems as a contradiction is actually true. That is what a paradox is.

Losing is gaining. Slavery is freedom. Weakness is strength. These are paradoxes that define Christianity. So is Christ’s statement, “*the last shall be first*.” The world thinks Christians are going backward, but God knows we are going forward.

I love rankings. For instance, in sports every fan wants to hold up those goofy looking huge foam hands that have the index finger proclaiming “We’re # 1.” How about your senior class rankings? I was proud to be in the “*upper half*” of my high school, #375 out of 751 – which went well with my motto of “C’s get degrees.” *U. S. News & World Report* recently published the top cities in America to live in. The top 6 are: Austin TX, Denver CO, Colorado Springs CO, Fayetteville ARK, Des Moines IA, and Minneapolis / St.Paul MN. Kind of makes us proud, huh?

I used to be a big fan of *Consumers Report* periodical. I bought “stuff” based on rankings, usually only purchasing items labeled “#1.” You want the best quality with the best price. You don’t buy what is “*last*,” you buy what is “*first*,” whether it is cars, appliances, cell phones, or toothpaste.”

But what about when it comes to people? Have you ever been totally honest with someone and said, “Hey Ralph, you are my 12th best friend, having moved up three spots from last year, so keep it up and you’ll crack the Top 10 next year!” At least I hope you don’t do that out loud. But in reality we can’t make everyone our BF (Best Friend), so someone has to be lower in our pecking order.

While Jesus doesn’t criticize us for ranking our friends (John seemed to be Jesus’ BF as he was called “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*” – Jn. 13:23; 20:2; 21:7,20), He does challenge our ranking system. Jesus makes us reevaluate who we love and what we value. By watching Christ, and imitating His example, our standards are often flipped upside down and inside out.

Matthew 19:13-30 is followed by the parable of the vineyard workers in 20:1-16. In these stories you see Jesus end chapter 19 with the phrase “*but many who are first will be last, and the last first*,” then end the parable with the phrase, “*so the last will be first, and the first last*.” Jesus is challenging His apostles on their value system. They had everything backwards from how God sees things. They ranked children down the totem pole, making them lower class compared to adults, and especially rich adults. When parents brought their children to be blessed by Jesus these disciples “*rebuked them*.” Jesus stopped them by rebuking them. “*Let the little children come to Me, do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven*” (19:14).

The apostles ranked the rich at the top of the totem pole. Jesus’ astonished them when He said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man (like the Rich Young Ruler who had just walked away sorrowful) to enter the kingdom of heaven. In stunned amazement they asked, “*Who then can be saved*?” In other words, a wealthy male Jew is surely in God’s upper class, right? He’s in God’s Top Ten, right? Jesus’ answer, putting it into a sports analogy, said he wouldn’t even make the playoffs, much less win the World Series or Super Bowl. A child or woman, considered lower class, would enter the kingdom ahead of him.

The confused apostles tried to figure this out. Peter, their spokesman, began to wonder if even they were in God’s Top Ten. Unlike the RYR who *“went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions,”* they had left their fishing nets and tax booths to follow Him. These twelve, who had regularly argued among themselves as to who was “*greatest*,” had to know, “*What shall we have*?” He tells them “*many who are first will be last, and the last first*.” That gets them wondering, and perhaps worrying. Their value system is being destroyed. To confuse them further He then pops them with a parable (20:1-16).

The workers who “*had born the burden and heat of the day*” with a twelve-hour shift were put on a par with those who worked only nine, six, three and one hours. That would be equivalent in our day to the tenured professor being classified, and paid, like the TA (Teacher Assistants). That’s like the CEO and Chairman of the Board being grouped with the janitor. In the church that is like the elders and preachers being ranked with the newborn babe. Exactly!

The apostles, who clamored to be #1, were no better in God’s system than the young teenage girl who had just been baptized. The years of service and the role played in the organization or work of the church had no bearing on God’s grading system. *GRACE* makes everyone equal! God doesn’t grade on a curve for we are all saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-10). Young or old, male or female, master or slave, we are all “*children of Abraham*” (Gal. 3:29). To phrase it from a children’s song, “Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight, Jesus loves all the people of the world.”

The World’s Ranking System slots people according to social, economic, educational, athletic, musical and speaking talents. We are ranked upper, middle or lower class. The world said Megan Markel married a **R**ich, **Y**oung, **R**uler - Prince Harry. The world might also say Benita married a POP - **P**oor **O**ld **P**reacher. I’m blessed my wife graded on God’s System, not the World’s.

Christians think, and live, different from the world. We are color blind. We are socially blind. We are culturally blind. As we each approach the kingdom of heaven’s gates we all say in unison: “*There is none righteous, no, not one*!” (Rom. 3:10,12,23). Every soul is of more value than all the world (Matt. 16:26). In heaven King David will live next door to Beggar Lazarus. Jonah will be neighbor to an Assyrian from Nineveh. In other words, “***The Last Is First***.” I love it, don’t you? If everyone believed that I am sure it would end all strife now plaguing our world. The racial divide would quickly fade to gray.

Until tomorrow… humble yourself under God’s hand, allowing Him to exalt you.

I love you. Rick