

Session #6

*The Upside-Down Kingdom*

The Anniversary Edition

By

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Chapter 5

Free Slaves

1

**Luke 4:16-21**

16 So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. **17** And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: **18** “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; **19** To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” **20** Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. **21** And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” So, all bore witness to Him and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth.

Proclaiming liberty. Setting free. Announcing the favorable year of the Lord. These words ring Jewish bells. The people know what Jesus means. They've heard these phrases again and again. Releasing, liberating, letting go, forgiving, restoring. Yes, yes! These are images of messianic hope. This is what the Messiah, "the Anointed One," is all about.

Three elements stand out in Jesus' use of Isaiah's passage. First, Jesus reveals that *he* is the Messiah. Second, his role is to bring liberating news to the poor, the blind, the slaves, and the oppressed. Third, this is the proclamation of God's favorable year. Then Jesus concludes with dynamite: "*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The messianic announcement is alive today in your presence. You are living witnesses to it. You are seeing it fulfilled before your very eyes! I am much more than Joseph's little boy. I am the *Messiah!*

## **Isaiah 61:1-7**

4

*1 “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, Because the Lord has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, 3 To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.” 4 And they shall rebuild the old ruins, They shall raise up the former desolations, And they shall repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. 5 Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, And the sons of the foreigner shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers. 6 But you shall be named the priest of the Lord, They shall call you the servants of our God. You shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, And in their glory you shall boast. 7 Instead of your shame you shall have double honor, And instead of confusion they shall rejoice in their portion, Therefore in their land shall they possess double’ Everlasting joy shall be theirs.*

In his simple announcement of the arrival of God's reign, Jesus omitted a phrase from the Isaiah passage about a day of vengeance, on which God would punish the wicked. Instead, he told several stories at the end of his sermon that confirmed just the opposite: God would extend mercy to the wicked and the Gentiles. This outrageous blasphemy infuriated the crowd.

The usual interpretation of Jesus' sermon spiritualizes its meaning. We assume that Jesus proclaimed release to the captives of sin, gave sight to the spiritually blind, and offered liberty to those oppressed by spiritual bondage. Although this is true, the Old Testament background of the text expands its meaning by rooting it in practical social realities. The "year of the Lord's favor" refers to the Hebrew Jubilee. Jesus thus linked his messianic role back to the Jubilee. His inaugural sermon is, in essence, a Jubilee proclamation.

Clearly, the social vision heralded by Jesus takes on new meaning in the Jubilee perspective. This vision offers an interpretive framework, a metaphor that enlarges our understanding of Jesus in new ways.

### Jubilee

Three books—Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus—describe the Jubilee vision. We're familiar with a weekly cycle of six workdays followed by a Sabbath. This pattern emerged from the creation narrative when God rested on the seventh day. This seventh year was called a *sabbatical* year. Jubilee celebrated the end of the seventh seven-year period. To summarize

The Sabbath ended a week of six days.

The sabbatical year ended a “week” of six years.

The Jubilee ended a “week” of sabbatical cycles.

The priest blew a special horn to signal the start of the Jubilee year. The sabbatical and Jubilee years established a chronological rhythm for Hebrew society. The vibrations of this rhythm could turn social life upside down. Three shake-ups were expected in the seventh, or sabbatical, year.

1. Land was given a vacation in the seventh year. Crops were not to be planted or harvested. Unplanted “volunteer” plants were to be left for the poor.
2. Slaves were released on the seventh year. Some folks became slaves because of rising debts. After working for six years as a hired servant, the Jubilee freed them in the seventh year.
3. Debts were erased in the sabbatical year. Since Israel had an agricultural economy, debts were mostly charitable loans to needy persons, not commercial ones. Charging interest on loans to other Hebrews was prohibited. The principle of a debt was canceled in the sabbatical year.

More important than the details of the Jubilee are the theological principles undergirding it. There can be no question that the Jubilee vision called for social upheaval, for upsetting the social order. As the social blueprint for the people of God, the Jubilee touched three factors that can generate inequality: (1) control of the land represents access to natural resources, (2) ownership of slaves symbolizes the human labor necessary for production, and (3) borrowing and lending money involves the management of capital and credit.

The use and distribution of these resources—natural, human, and financial—tilts the balance of justice in any society. In the modern world, technology has become a fourth variable in the equation. By controlling these resources, some people become wealthy as others slide into poverty.



Six Jubilee principles highlight the divine vision for the age-old problem of social injustice.

1. Divine ownership. God owns the natural and human resources. These are God's eminent domain.
2. God's liberation. God's decisive act in the exodus from Egypt provides the theological bases for Jubilee. Liberation!
3. Jubilee response. The Jubilee was a response to God's gracious liberation and deliverance.
4. Jubilee compassion. Jubilee behavior responds to God's acts in history and to the cries of those crushed by social injustice.
5. Upside-down revolution. God's grace moves those in seats of power, the rich, the influential. They see with compassionate eyes and join by redistributing natural and human resources.
6. Institutionalized grace. The Jubilee concept is rooted in a keen awareness of human sin and greed.

## ***Meanwhile, Back At Nazareth***

Good news for the poor. Release for the captives. Sight for the blind. Liberty for the oppressed. God's favorable year! The old words ring with new meaning as Jesus quotes them in hometown Nazareth.

The literal meaning of Jubilee was certainly good news in Nazareth. The poor could say goodbye to their debts. Those driven into slavery because of debts could now come home. Peasants forced to sell land would see it returned once again to their family. No question about it—this was very good news!

But there's more. Jesus wasn't just making another Jubilee proclamation, "The Lord has anointed me" was a messianic announcement.

Jubilee talk also clarifies the role of the Messiah, the one who announces God's release. The Messiah lets us go, forgiving our debts and redeeming our sins. Jesus Christ remolds us into the image of God. He cuts the chains of sin. Our eyes open. The handcuffs of evil drop off. This is true liberation. We repent and turn back to the garden rekindling harmony with God—finding a place once more in God's family.

The Jubilee restoration wasn't only for Jews. Now, in the words of Jesus, it restored everyone—even Gentiles. Jesus outrageously offered Gentiles words of grace instead of vengeance. The day of favored people was over. This undercut Jewish nationalism. The Jubilee kingdom was universal. It knew no ethnic barriers, no national favorites.

This is startling news that enraged the Nazareth crowd.

## *The Jubilee Habit*

A redemptive rhythm emerges from the Jubilee. It echoes from garden to empty tomb. The drummers of holy history pound out a four-beat message vibrating down through the ages:

Garden—Egypt—exodus—Jubilee

Perfection—sin—salvation—mercy

Freedom—oppression—restoration—forgiveness

The first beat reminds us of God's perfect creation. The second beat recalls oppression in Egypt. God's mighty intervention brings restoration and salvation. Finally, we can respond to God's salvation by extending mercy and forgiveness to others.

Once we were oppressed. Once we were captives. But now, the Jubilee reminds us, we're forgiven debtors. We're released slaves. What should be our response? Suddenly the reciprocal rule from ***Deuteronomy 15:13-14*** strikes home:

**13** *“When you release a male servant, do not send him away empty-handed. 14 Give him a generous farewell gift from your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress. Share with him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you.”*

Jesus echoes the chain reaction. Forgive as I have forgiven. Be merciful as I have been merciful. Love as I have loved. Give freely as I have given to you.

In the Jubilee model, God's graciousness moves us to forgive others. God's mercy nudges us to cancel debts. We release our slaves because God released us. In short, we pass the Jubilee on—extending grace to others.

Just as the Hebrew response to God's liberation had real consequences, so must ours. It's not enough to sit and ponder the Jubilee's theological beauty. We must act. The biblical model calls us to start forgiving not only interpersonal insults but financial ones as well. We lower rents and raise salaries. In the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Matthew 6:12.

The Jubilee principle of reciprocal forgiveness pervades New Testament teachings. Jesus' words about wealth suddenly make sense in the context of the Jubilee model. In this framework his teachings take on new meaning. They invite us to respond in concrete, economic ways to God's liberating initiative.