

Text: John 18:33-37

In today's gospel we see a collision of two kingdoms. Lord Jonathan Sacks, orthodox rabbi, philosopher and theologian, writes about this collision: "Politics and religion do not mix. They are inherently different activities. Religion seeks salvation, politics seeks power. When religion becomes political or politics become religious, the result is disastrous to religion and politics alike."

In an age where religion and politics are fused into a toxic mixture, Dallas Willard, theologian and professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California, challenges the 21st century church to go back to the insights of Christ's teachings.

He comes down equally hard on Sunday-only Christians and left- or right-wing Pharisees who use Christianity to advance political agendas rather than spiritual ones.

In his book, "The Divine Conspiracy," he suggests that we Christians need to understand and buy into what he calls "the great inversion," a state of being reversed in position and turned upside down.

While the Pilates of this world throw themselves headlong into the pursuit of power and possessions, we Christ followers are to do just the opposite.

We are called to invest in the kingdom of heaven, not the kingdom of this earth.

Jesus reminds us of this with his words, "What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

People who provide only for this life, but take no care for eternity, are wise for a moment, but fools forever.

In today's text, we see Jesus in a painful dialogue with Pilate, governor of Judea, on the eve of his crucifixion.

Things are obviously heating up – Jesus is in deep trouble.

His accusers are screaming for his head and looking for governmental sanction on his condemnation.

Pilate is hearing them out, but is unsure about what Jesus may have done to deserve such a harsh treatment.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked Jesus, “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

But in response to Pilate’s question, Jesus says something that must have seemed confusing, maybe even a little crazy:

“My kingdom is not of this world.”

For us who follow Christ, that doesn’t sound crazy at all.

We know exactly what Jesus is talking about.

Yet his answer to Pilate should move us to evaluate our own lives.

We should ask ourselves: “Do our values, our choices and our lifestyle reflect Christ’s kingdom that “is not of this world”?”

How much of my time, talents and personal resources am I spending on the kingdom of this world?

Am I living an inverted lifestyle?”

These are challenging questions that we must ask if we are really serious about following Jesus.

Perhaps we are wondering and say,

“How do we go about this self-evaluation?

What standard do we use?

Probably the best tool for self-evaluation is the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in chapters 5 through 7 of Matthew’s gospel.

There Jesus provides a summary of what the inverted Christian life looks like.

We see, first of all, that anyone whose life is inverted is going through a transformation, a character makeover.

This character makeover is an ongoing and lifelong process.

Dallas Willard writes about this makeover in this way: “The greatest need you and I have, the greatest need of collective humanity, is renovation of our heart...Indeed, the only hope of humanity lies in the fact that, as our spiritual dimension has been formed, so it also can be transformed.”

Every so often on television, one of the afternoon talk shows will feature a “makeover” theme.

Usually someone will submit to a redo of hair, makeup and clothing that leaves the audience gasping with the before and after contrast.

If we were able to see someone who is living an inverted lifestyle by what Willard calls a renovation of the heart, we too, like the television audience, would gasp over the makeover that is taking place in that person's life as a result of Christ's work.

For example, in the Sermon on the Mount we see that inverted Christians display a humble attitude, a hunger for righteousness and a merciful spirit.

What's more, they are seeking peace, not conflict, in relationships and are so deeply convinced of Jesus' teaching that they are willing to endure the ridicule of others for being different.

As we continue on in the Sermon on the Mount, we discover something else.

We see that an inverted Christian has a clear sense of a purpose in life. God intends for believers to live as salt and light in the world.

That is to say, our God-given purpose on earth is to flavor with Christ-like selfless love, the lives of those around us and those who do not know him.

Or, as Jesus also suggests, we are to bring light; that is, our God-given purpose is to shine the light of the gospel on the shadows of human need.

We also learn that an inverted Christian does not nurse resentments, does not use others sexually for reasons of self indulgence,

is faithful in marriage and is a person whose word can be trusted.

The inverted believer has a forgiving spirit and is generous with money and trusts God completely.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus shows us what the inverted Christian life looks like.

Pastor David Reid tells the story about a minister who visited the Antwerp diamond district in Belgium.

He was shown into a room where hundreds and hundreds of diamonds were spread out on a table in front of an assessor whose job was to assess the value of each diamond.

The minister watched the assessor for several minutes and then said to him, “If I were looking at all these stones, hour after hour, I would begin to lose my perspective on the value of one as compared to another. How can you make a decision about the value of each one?”

The diamond assessor turned quietly in response to this question and held up his hand, on which was a ring with a magnificent diamond. “This is the perfect diamond,” he said, “and when I look at all these stones, every couple of minutes I stop and look at this one and from this one I recalibrate my perspective. I measure all these against this one perfect stone.

Jesus is the perfect diamond by which we calibrate or self-evaluate our life.

What he preached in the Sermon on the Mount, he practiced in real life. His kingdom was not of this world and his inverted lifestyle reflected it. Now, we who claim his name need to ask ourselves, “What does our lifestyle reveal?

Are we with him or are we, like Pilate and his countless facsimiles in history, given over to preoccupations of this world and a ruthless pursuit of power and possessions?

As Jesus neared the end of his Sermon on the Mount, he confronted his own disciples with these penetrating words, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Since there is a collision of kingdoms, we are faced with some crucial, all-important questions:

First: How much of our time, talents and personal resources are we spending on the kingdom of this world?

And second: Do our values, our choices and our lifestyle reflect Christ’s kingdom that “is not of this world?”

Let’s observe a moment of silence as we reflect on these two questions.