

You Turn Things Upside Down!

Things aren't always what they seem. Appearances can be deceiving. In the movie *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a simple but hard-working man named Edmund comes to this realization rather quickly. Edmund was in love with a woman excited to be with him for the rest of their lives. He had a long-time friend, Fernand, whom he trusted with his life. Everything seemed well. Things even seemed to be on the up-and-up. Edmund was being promoted at work. He got engaged to his wonderful girlfriend. But, appearances can be deceiving. Fernand, the trusted friend, oozed with jealousy. He convinced Edmund of his friendship, but on the inside, Fernand had already betrayed Edmund. He paid his friend Edmund lip service when they were together. But when they were apart, Fernand was plotting to take away what Edmund had – a happy life. He spoke words of kindness to Edmund, but his heart was far from friendship. Soon, as his plan unfolded, Edmund was arrested and charged with treason. He was taken to an isolated prison, one comparable to Alcatraz, only worse. He had no job. No wife. No money. No life. Things were no longer on the up-and-up. The only thing that kept him from ending his life was a message he saw carved in his jail cell. "God will give me justice." Things hadn't been what they seemed. Fernand turned Edmund's life upside down.

During the time of Isaiah, everything *seemed* fine in Judah. Politically, the dynasty of the House of David seemed to be returning to its former glory days. The kings of Judah were extending the borders, defeating Philistines, fortifying cities, and otherwise striking fear into their neighbors. Socially, people were gaining wealth and status, so much so, that the women of Jerusalem were said to walk haughtily *with outstretched necks, glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet*. The women had gaudy bracelets, shiny jewelry, trendy clothes, and expensive perfumes. The men *laid down on beds of ivory, stretching themselves out on their couches, eating lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, singing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David inventing for themselves instruments of music, drinking wine in bowls (!!)* and anointing themselves with the finest oils! The people even seemed fine spiritually. The priests brought ample sacrifices to God in the Temple. The leaders followed the ceremonial cleanliness laws. The Lord spoke to his people through the prophets. Yep, everything seemed fine. It looked like things were on the up-and-up. But, appearances can be deceiving.

It's quite a wonder to hear the words spoken in our text! *And the Lord said: "Because this people draws near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by me, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden."* Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?" **You turn things upside down!** Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"? What could prompt the Lord to say such a harsh thing against a people who seemed to be on the up-and-up? Like I said, things weren't quite what they seemed. Appearances can be deceiving. Politically, the kings trusted in their own success. They didn't attribute it to the Lord. Socially, the people abused their wealth to the detriment of the poor, and they deprived them of justice. Spiritually, the people paid lip service to the Lord. They *drew near with their mouths*, but their hearts were far away. Things weren't what they seemed. They weren't on the up-and-up. Everything was **upside-down**.

Yahweh was angry, to put it mildly. *The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to me?' says the Lord. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats...Stop burning meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations – I cannot bear your evil assemblies...my soul hates [them]! They have become a burden to me.* The people and their leaders were going through the motions, but it wasn't doing them any good! They were doing what God required in the Law, but God hated it! Why did God hate their sacrifices? Why did he hate their festivals? Why didn't he want their incense? Because, as Isaiah says in chapter 5, *He looked for justice, and behold, **bloodshed**, for righteousness, and behold, an **outcry**.* The leaders of Israel made the ceremonies given by God into "rules taught by men." They were simply ceremonies, nothing more. What they were ignoring was justice – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, nursing the sick to health, lifting up the disenfranchised, and seeking the lost. They focused on success and ignored the Lord. God didn't want empty sacrifices. He wanted justice. *Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.* Justice and righteousness were turned upside-down, trampled under the feet of prideful

kings, haughty socialites, and hypocritical priests. Hearts were haughty. Eyes were turned away. Kings and socialites were at the top. The pots scorned the potter. *You turn things upside-down!*

Many of you are used to feeling upside-down, aren't you? You know what I'm talking about, right? Sure, everything *seems* fine. Socially, you have family and friends to talk to. You smile when you talk and laugh when there's a joke. Physically, you have two legs to take you somewhere, two eyes to see, and two ears to hear. Spiritually, you go to church 2-4 times a month. You've been baptized. You take the Lord's Supper. You even pay attention to the sermon every now and again. Yep, everything *seems* fine. But, appearances can be deceiving. Things aren't always what they seem. Deep down, you know that everything's *upside-down*.

Which of us hasn't been turned upside down? Maybe you have people to talk to. But, you know that they talk about you behind your back. It's not a good feeling, is it? You wish that someone would just come to *you* if he or she had a problem with you. Why should they go to someone else and talk about *me*? It's all backwards. It's upside down. Maybe you take care of your body. You eat right, get some exercise, and don't smoke. But, then you get sick. It's cancer. Or an infection. Or fading eyesight. When you're sick, it's almost impossible to feel right-side-up. You're almost always hanging upside down. Maybe you do go to church every week. Maybe you pray and sing with everyone else. You might even go to Bible study. But maybe you're just going through the motions. Maybe you think that's all you need to be healthy spiritually. On the other hand, maybe you're angry with God again. You try to tell him what's what. Out there, you might even question God. Is he really in control? Is he really a good God? Does he even exist? You read the news; you know what goes on out there. Things aren't right in this world. Everything's upside-down.

During Isaiah's time, you'd better believe that God wouldn't stand idle. He wasn't about to let people keep things upside-down. *In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the blind will see. Once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down – those who with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.* Woah! Talk about upside-down! The deaf will hear?! The blind will see?! The humble and needy will rejoice in the Lord?! Yahweh promised to pull a reversal of his own to make things

right. The rich and haughty would be brought down. The liars would be cut down. The abusers would be brought to justice. Things were going to get upside down and all around!

And they did. *And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.* Jesus turned things upside down. He exposed the Pharisees for what they were – hypocrites. They seemed faithful on the outside; but inside, they were full of pride, deceit, and foolishness. They would rather a sick person continue suffering than for Jesus to heal on the Sabbath. But he didn't stop with whistle-blowing. *And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.* Upside down and all around! Jesus healed the sick. He opened the eyes of the blind. He made the crippled to walk. He opened the ears of the deaf. He turned sickness of all kind on its head. He called tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners to him. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven!*

But again, appearances are deceiving. Things are not as they seem. Jesus was more than just a miracle worker. He was much more than a teacher of morality and justice. *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* Jesus Christ himself was turned upside down. Jesus, our Lord and God, became man. Jesus, God in the flesh, the Lord of life, died. Jesus, the righteous one, the Lamb of God, died. Jesus, the just judge, was killed by those who Isaiah said, *with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.* The righteousness of the wise Pharisees became nothing. The foolishness of the cross became life. The impossibility of the tomb became reality. Christ's new life reversed the curse of death. He turned reality upside-down!

And don't think it stopped with his death and resurrection. Jesus Christ continues to turn lives – upside-down and right-side-up. He brought you, a sinful child, to the waters of baptism. There you died with him, only to be raised with him in new life! Here, at this altar, Christ feeds you, the hungry, with food and drink to life eternal. Here, in worship, Christ preaches his very words to you, the sick and despairing, to give you hope and a future. Christ has overcome your weaknesses! He's turned them upside-down! Christ forgives your sins! He gives you a new

beginning! The sick are healed! The lonely find a friend! The poor find riches – right here!
Jesus turns your life upside-down!

Edmund did eventually see the day of God's justice. He was vindicated. His enemy lost his life, while Edmund got his life back. He married his fiancée. He had wealth and renown. God have him justice, even after hardship. In Christ, we still experience hardship in this world. But, we have even more than we can imagine waiting on the other side. Hope, life, and a future are ours. No more pain. No more sin. No more suffering. Christ has turned our lives upside-down and right-side-up! Amen.

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