

“Jesus In Reverse”

Matthew 10:37-39

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An address to the Senior High Class of 2010

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The Class of 2010 at Memorial, congratulations!
We are all proud of you! I’m sure it is true to say that all of you call yourselves “Christians.” I hope you know in which direction taking on the name of Christ will take you? And it is not forward! No, I have not lost my mind; I have not got this wrong. Let me explain.

He was from Lithuania. He spoke seven languages. He taught five of them. He was Professor of Biblical Languages at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. He taught me Biblical Hebrew. He smoked cigars before the 8 o’ clock class in the mornings. He once came to class wearing his pajama top instead of a shirt! He was probably in his sixties at the time. His name was Professor Alfred

Rooks. He was quite eccentric ...a nutty professor!

One afternoon Professor Rooks’ wife came to pick him up at the university. I was in a group standing close to where his car was parked. We watched as Dr. Rooks told his wife to let him drive home. He got behind the steering wheel, slammed the car into reverse, put his foot on the accelerator, and with a quick, jerking motion backed his car into the one parked behind him. There was the sound of metal scraping as bumpers met each other, and then the sound of Dr. Rooks’ raised voice as he turned to his wife and yelled: “Can’t you see where I’m going?”

What’s the lesson? We better know what we’re doing when we’re in reverse. As graduates who are first and foremost Christians, you better know what you’re doing when you’re in reverse because you are following Jesus in reverse! That is the direction in which I urge you to move ...not forward, but rather in reverse!

What do I mean? Just this: Jesus moved in reverse. I mean that Jesus overturned the conventional

wisdom of his day; Jesus reversed society's idea of how people ought to live; Jesus stood for a radically different way. As you plan to go off to college or to enter the workplace, Jesus expects the same from you.

Let me ask you: Have not Jesus' teachings reversed the way you see things? Jesus' teachings contained paradoxical combinations that, in contrast to the popular culture of his day and our own day, have overturned our conventional expectations: the poor are blessed, the first are last, the humble exalted, what is hidden becomes manifest, the small become great, the hungry are filled, the weary find rest, those who weep laugh, the mourners are comforted, the sick are healed, and the dead live. Not to forget the words in Mark's gospel chapter 10 where Jesus says, "Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." Such sayings turn upside down our ordinary way of seeing things.

I have called this message *Jesus In Reverse*. At the center of Jesus' message is an invitation to see differently. According to Jesus, losers will be winners,

and losing is gaining. What kind of back-to-front wisdom is that? Remember the rich young man who came to Jesus with a question on earning eternal life. The man said he had always obeyed the commandments of Moses, so what did he lack? Recognizing the man's resistance level, what did Jesus tell him to do? He told him to *downsize!* Jesus said: "Sell your possessions and give to the poor, to have (not earn) treasure in heaven." This was an example of Jesus' reverse teaching that losing is gaining.

On another occasion Jesus told his disciples that high positions go to disciples who serve each other, working with almost no recognition. The world looks at this and says, "No way! We work for what we get."

People in marketing would want to jump up and give Jesus advice ... "No, no, no, Jesus! You need something positive and catchy ... smooth out the downside and emphasize the positive aspects of discipleship. Your message, Jesus, is too hard for us to hear." Those into marketing would say, "Rather start

out, Jesus, with an offer of seeing the coming of the Kingdom” ... “Use a slogan like, *Follow Jesus and see the coming of the kingdom*” “Then maybe at the end have in very small print or by a fast talking voice: *Caution! Following Jesus may result, in loss of wealth, life, and carrying of crosses.*” “This would be easier for people to hear, Jesus. You’d get a much better response!”

New Testament scholar, J.B. Phillips, speaks of the revolutionary quality of Jesus’ teachings as representing a “complete reversal of worldly values.” For example, were we to create our own list of beatitudes for life in contemporary culture, perhaps they would be something like this list suggested by Phillips: *Happy are the pushers, for they get on in the world.* *Happy are the hard-boiled, for they never let life hurt them.* *Happy are those who complain, for they get their own way in the end.* *Happy are the blasé, for they never worry over their sins.*

Happy are the slave-drivers, for they get results.

Happy are the knowledgeable people of the world, for they know their way around.

Happy are the trouble-makers, for they make people take notice of them.

Following Jesus, Class of 2010, is like navigating your lives in *divine reversal* or with *Jesus in reverse*. Listen one more time: “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will gain it.” Simply put, you are meant to be living with Jesus in reverse.

The Son of God came to us as a helpless infant born to a poor family in an unimportant region. He ended his life on a cross, naked, practically deserted, and seemingly powerless. Jesus in reverse ... that is the path to greatness and the way of the kingdom. It is a reversal of our culture’s popular values. It is about loving and serving and offering hospitality to the unimportant and unloved.

Being with Jesus in reverse will not be easy ...you

may incur the disbelief, cynicism, mockery, laughter, and resistance of others around you. To encounter the world in the style of Jesus reverses the popular understanding of status, and order, and values.

Let me conclude with an anonymous poem that seems to express something of the reverse direction we who follow Christ are called to take in our thinking, seeing, and acting. It could be called *Reverse Logic of a Christian*. Here it is:

*When I say . . . I am a Christian
I'm not shouting "I am saved."
I'm whispering "I get lost"
That is why I chose this way.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian
I don't speak of this with pride.
I'm confessing that I stumble
and need someone to be my guide.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian
I'm not trying to be strong.
I'm professing that I am weak
and pray for strength to carry on.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian
I'm not bragging of success.
I'm admitting I have failed
and cannot ever pay the debt*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian
I'm not claiming to be perfect.
My flaws are too visible
but God believes I'm worth it.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian
I still feel the sting of pain.
I have my share of heartaches
which is why I seek his name.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian
I do not wish to judge.
I have no authority
I only know I'm loved.*

Thank you for listening and God bless you!