

Study Guide for
The Upside-Down Kingdom

by Donald B. Kraybill

Introduction & Chapters 1 - 3

Introduction

For this 25th Anniversary Edition of Donald B. Kraybill's *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, the author requested that a study guide be written for teachers or leaders to use in planning Sunday school lessons or small group sessions around the text. This study guide is designed not as a rigid lesson plan, but one that serves as an outline for inspiring discussion of the text. The study guide is divided into four sections for each chapter: Gathering, Sharing, Listening & Reflecting, and Sending. Each lesson follows basically the same form. As leader of the sessions, make sure to read Kraybill's "Guide for Discussion Leaders" on pages 263-264 of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* before making your first lesson plans.

The basic outline of the lessons can be adjusted according to your tastes and the preference of the class. All of the lesson guides begin and end with prayer. Although they are included, you need not feel obligated to use them. Also, each lesson includes reading a parable. Because this course is about understanding the upside-down reign of God, the parables serve as pictures exemplifying God's reign. The titles of the parables are from the *New International Version* of the Bible.

Kraybill included his own questions for discussion that are excellent for use in a classroom or small group. While this study guide is designed to enhance Kraybill's text, it also incorporates the discussion questions into the study guides for each chapter. There are a number of discussion prompts in the lessons. Feel free to use your own discussion questions or base the discussion around class members' questions. To better facilitate the discussion, have your group come to class with a list of questions and thoughts from the reading.

It is important that class or small group members come to the sessions already having read the chapters. Some review is incorporated into the lessons, but most of the time should be devoted to discussion. Encourage the group to do the reading ahead of time. Chapter lengths vary, but the reading should take no more than 30-60 minutes. Also, there is some reading aloud during class. You can judge whether or not the group members are comfortable reading

aloud. The safest route is to ask for a volunteer to do the reading.

Remember that this study guide is just an outline. Depending on the personalities of your group you may follow this outline closely or loosely. Above all, get into *The Upside-Down Kingdom* and engage yourselves in lively conversation and discussion!

Chapter 1

Down is Up

Gathering

- You may choose to open the session by leading the group in prayer. This could either be a prayer for the specific needs and goals of the group or it could be a simple recitation of the Lord's Prayer.
- For New Testament Scripture reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Mustard Seed* found in Mark 4:30-32.

Sharing

- After opening with prayer and scripture reading, ask the group to think about ways they would describe the kingdom of God. These could be original analogies, an image that stood out from first chapter, or an example from the Bible. Take about 3-5 minutes to make a list on the board or a large piece of paper. Discuss the suggestions the group compiled.

Listening and Reflecting

- Transition from describing the kingdom of God to thinking critically about *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. As leader of the session, review the content of the text with the class for a few minutes. Talk about what Kraybill calls "Detours Around Jesus" or share your favorite section from the chapter.
- Discuss the questions Kraybill includes for Chapter One (found on page 257) for 8-10 minutes. If the group is large, break into smaller groups to better facilitate discussion of the text. For the sake of time, assign one or two questions for each small group. If the group is not large, the discussion can be done as a total group activity.
- Gather back into the large group and have a spokesperson from each small group give the highlights of their discussion.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the last few paragraphs of the first chapter, beginning with "The kingdom vision outlined..." on page 31 and continuing to the end of the chapter.
- Kraybill ends the first chapter by asking some big questions. It is easy to talk about

turning our backs to the kingdoms of this world, but what are ways—even small ways—to show our loyalty to God by taking an active role in reign of God on earth?

Sending

- End with a prayer encouraging each other to follow God's call by actively participating in the reign of heaven on earth.
- Assign the second chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 33-55) as well as Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 for the next session.

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Chapter 2

Mountain Politics

Gathering

- If the group is open to the idea, invite a class member to offer prayer. Or, you may wish to begin by reciting the Lord's Prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Tenants* found in Matthew 21:33-46.

Sharing

- This chapter is dense with the summary of history. Rather than getting bogged down in a discussion of ancient Hebrew tradition, guide the focus of the lesson to Jesus' counter-cultural message.
- To review the chapter, ask the group what they found new, interesting, or provocative in the reading. Compile a list on the board or large paper.

Listening and Reflecting

- After hearing thoughts from various class members, discuss Kraybill's questions for the second chapter (found on pages 257-258). Divide into smaller groups if the class size necessitates it. Reconvene after 8-10 minutes to summarize the discussions.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the last few paragraphs of the chapter, beginning with "Jesus was a revolutionary..." on page 54 and continuing to the end of the chapter.
- How does Jesus play off Hebrew tradition at the same time that he gives a counter-cultural message? Does this background of Jewish political history change your understanding of the Gospel message? In what ways? What new angles are brought to light with this Jewish history in mind? Jesus is seen as very political—is this

- something new? Is it helpful, offensive, or obvious?
- What are some ways to become active (politically or otherwise) in the upside-down reign of God?

Sending

- End with a prayer empowering one another in ways to be a visible witness in the counter-cultural reign of God.

Assign the third chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 56-70) for the next session.

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Chapter 3

Temple Piety

Gathering

- Invite a class member to open the lesson with prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Lost Coin* found in Luke 15:8-10.

Sharing

- Like the second chapter, this chapter is filled with a myriad of background information explaining the roles of the religious authorities. Instead of getting bogged down in the minute detail of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Levites, focus the discussion on ways Jesus worked to overturn the religious status quo.
- Make a list on the board of the ways ancient Hebrew sacred and secular powers were tied together. How did Jesus work to purify Judaism from the ruling authorities?

Listening and Reflecting

- After opening the conversation of the text, discuss Kraybill's questions for the third chapter (found on page 258). Divide into smaller groups if the class size necessitates it. Reconvene after 8-10 minutes to summarize the discussion.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the last few paragraphs from the chapter, beginning with "Jesus affirmed the new..." on page 69 and continuing to the end of the chapter.
- Jesus was very concerned with rejecting the temptations of institutional. How do we keep Christianity fresh, without getting bogged down by complex doctrine and rules? How are we tempted by the status quo? What elements of religious status quo would

Jesus reject today?

Sending

- Close with prayer encouraging one another to seek out ways of rejecting the status quo of Christianity.
- Assign the fourth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 71-83) for the next session.

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Chapters 4 -6

Chapter 4

Wilderness Bread

In the discussion questions for this lesson (page 258) Kraybill poses the question: "Does it 'spiritualize' a serious problem like poverty to say that 'Jesus is the bread of life'?" As Christians we are compelled to take action to alleviate human suffering. One response to this question is to engage your group in a project to help end world hunger. Kraybill gives a list of websites that are helpful in generating ideas for such a venture. I suggest the websites: www.bread.org, www.cropwalk.org, or www.freedomfromhunger.org as good starting points. For a complete list of Kraybill's recommendations, look at "Website Resources" on pages 297-298 of The Upside-Down Kingdom. As class facilitator, browse through a few of the websites to familiarize yourself with various projects. You may wish to ask for volunteers to take the initiative in coordinating this class project. Plan to introduce this idea with the fourth chapter. After a few weeks, allow class time for the project coordinators to present options for the rest of the class to choose from.

Gathering

- Invite a class member to open with prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Wedding Banquet* found in Matthew 22:1-14.

Sharing

- Invite a class member or two to share a favorite section from the text. What was significant to them in the chapter? What questions did they have?

Listening and Reflecting

- Kraybill poses some provocative questions for Chapter Four on page 258. Divide into smaller groups (if necessary) to discuss your responses. Reconvene as a large group

after ten or fifteen minutes to share highlights of the small group discussions or tie up loose ends from the whole class discussion.

- Read the last few paragraphs of the chapter aloud, beginning with "When the values of Jesus' upside-down kingdom..." at the top of page 82 and continuing to the end of the chapter.
- Jesus lived "hand to mouth" in a society that was disdainful of the poverty-stricken. How does this image of a "homeless savior" speak to the prejudices of modern Christians?

Sending

- Close with prayer encouraging one another to look for ways of reaching out to the poverty stricken in your area and the world.
- Assign the fifth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 84-98) for the next session.

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Chapter 5

Free Slaves

Gathering

- Invite a class member to open the lesson with prayer.
- For the New Testament reading, ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Great Banquet* found in Luke 14:15-24 or *The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant* from Matthew 18:23-35.

Sharing

- The possibility of social upheaval makes some people uncomfortable. Imagine you are ordinary Jews and Gentiles living during the time of Jesus. As a class, briefly share what your reactions to Jesus' revolutionary social message would have been. How might you have reacted to hearing one of the above parables?

Listening and Reflecting

- How do the ideas from the fifth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* build on what was discussed in the fourth chapter? In the first four chapters?
- To focus on the fifth chapter, talk about the six Jubilee principles for combating social injustice or share your favorite section from the chapter.

- Divide into smaller groups if necessary to discuss the questions Kraybill includes for Chapter Five (found on page 259) for 8-10 minutes.
- Gather back into the large group and have a spokesperson from each small group give the highlights of their discussion.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the last few paragraphs of the chapter, beginning with "Christian obedience today..." on page 97 and continuing to the end of the chapter.
- Kraybill asks questions on page 96 about pocketbooks and piety. Affluent or not, these kinds of questions can make modern Christians very uncomfortable. How do you reconcile the issues of faith and income?

Sending

- Invite a class member to lead in a closing prayer.
- Assign the sixth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 99-119) for the next session.

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Chapter 6

Luxurious Poverty

Gathering

- Opening prayer
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Rich Fool* found in Luke 12:15-21.

Sharing

- What is our typical response to people lower on the "social ladder"? Invite members of your class to share how they responded the last time a person from the street approached them asking for money or food. Gently evaluate their responses from the perspective of *The Upside-Down Kingdom*.

Listening and Reflecting

- This chapter has the potential to stir up a controversial discussion. Before delving in, briefly review content by talking about the six dangers of wealth or asking individuals to share their favorite sections.
- Discuss the questions Kraybill includes for Chapter Six (found on page 259). Break into smaller groups as necessary. After several minutes, summarize the main points of

- the discussion as a group.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the last few paragraphs of the sixth chapter, beginning with "The stories in this chapter..." on page 118 and continuing to the end of the chapter.
 - In this chapter Kraybill writes about the dangers of wealth. Especially now, in an age of retirement planning and mutual funds, wealth and greed are distractions from the kingdom. In many ways *The Parable of the Rich Fool* speaks directly to this kind of financial security. How do we reconcile Jesus' "kingdom of nobodies" with our modern economic affluence?

Sending

- Invite a class member to lead in closing prayer.
- Assign the sixth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 99-119) for the next session.

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Chapters 7 - 9

Chapter 7

Right-Side-Up Detours

Gathering

- Invite the class to join in the Lord's Prayer to begin the class session.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* found in Matthew 20:1-16.

Sharing

- Think of all those pithy sayings you learned about money: "A penny saved is a penny earned" or "God helps those who help themselves." Using Kraybill's reasoning from the chapter, invite the class to brainstorm ways Jesus might have responded to these "proverbs."

Listening and Reflecting

- To shift into a discussion of *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, review the detours around Jesus' call for economic conversion.
- Discuss the questions Kraybill includes for Chapter Seven (found on page 259-260). Break into smaller discussion groups and divide the questions between the groups if the class size necessitates it.
- After allowing several minutes for discussion, reconvene as a large group to summarize the smaller group discussions.
- Ask a volunteer to read aloud from the chapter. Read the section "Upside-Down Giving" on pages 138-139.

- This chapter drives home a tough point about distractions to Kingdom living. What kind of a reaction does this chapter spark in your class? Enthusiasm? Anger? Guilt? Encourage class members to verbalize their strong emotions on this topic.

Sending

- End the session with a prayer encouraging one another to have changes in attitude to promote positive action in God's kingdom.
- Assign the eighth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 140-166) for the next session.

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Chapter 8

Impious Piety

Gathering

- Invite a class member to open with prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector* found in Luke 18:9-14.

Sharing

- For the Pharisees, living by the letter of the law only made the Sabbath into a complicated ritual. Have the class make a list of modern "church rules" that hamper celebration of the Sabbath (possibilities might include: wearing a suit and tie to church or having worship services on Sunday morning). Following in the tradition of social upheaval exemplified by Jesus, how might you elevate human need over religious dogma?

Listening and Reflecting

- Transition from thinking about your own church practices to thinking critically about Hebrew tradition in *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. As group leader, lead a short review of Chapters 1-8. Focus your discussion on Chapter 8 by sharing a section you found important from the text.
- Divide into smaller groups if necessary to discuss the questions Kraybill includes for Chapter Eight (found on page 260) for 8-10 minutes.
- Gather back into the large group and have a spokesperson from each small group give the highlights of their discussion.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the last two paragraphs of the chapter, beginning with "The church is always caught..." on page 166 and continuing to the end of the

chapter.

- Kraybill suggests that one way to keep religion from becoming empty ritual is by evaluating our church institutions and practices in the sabbatical year. How might your church implement such a plan for cleaning out its "white elephants"?

Sending

- End the session with a prayer encouraging one another to practice welcoming, forgiving compassion to enhance the new vision, values, and openness for God's kingdom.
- Assign the ninth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 167-193) for the next session.

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Chapter 9

Lovable Enemies

Gathering

- Lead the group in an opening prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Good Samaritan* found in Luke 10:25-37.

Sharing

- Invite a class member or two to share their favorite section from the text. What was significant to them in the chapter? What questions do they have?

Listening and Reflecting

- For a brief review of the chapter, summarize the principles of agape or share a favorite section and the insight you have gained from it.
- After opening the conversation of the text, discuss Kraybill's questions for the ninth chapter (found on pages 260-261). Divide into smaller groups if the class size necessitates it. Reconvene after 8-10 minutes to summarize the discussions.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the section entitled "A Vision of Shalom" on pages 191-193.
- Within the text, Kraybill poses a number of difficult questions about how Christians should respond to violence. How do we stay on the right path in the midst of detours around agape?

Sending

- Close with prayer encouraging one another to put agape love into action.

Assign the tenth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 194-217) for the next session.

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Chapters 10 - 12

Chapter 10

Inside Outsiders

Gathering

- Ask a volunteer to open the session by leading in prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Two Sons* found in Matthew 21:28-32.

Sharing

- Jesus spent his time with Gentiles, Samaritans, women, tax collectors, and other outcasts of the day. Ask the class to identify times when they felt like "outsiders". How did they feel? Did anyone reach out to them?

Listening and Reflecting

- Transition into the discussion of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* by briefly reviewing the content of the text. As discussion leader, talk about a section that was particularly insightful to you.
- Divide into smaller groups if necessary to discuss the questions that Kraybill includes for Chapter Ten (found on page 261).
- After several minutes, gather back into the large group and have a spokesperson from each small group give the highlights of their discussion.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud two paragraphs from the chapter. Begin with "God has created us as social beings..." on page 213 and read to the end of the next paragraph.
- Jesus broke through ancient Hebrew social barricades by freely interacting with

people from other "social boxes." After discussing the text, ask the class to reflect on ways they can break through the social barricades separating themselves from the list of people compiled earlier. What are ways of making your church more inclusive instead of exclusive?

Sending

- End with a prayer encouraging each other to go outside the "comfort zone" of normative social interaction.
- Assign the eleventh chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 218-240) for the next session.

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Chapter 11

Low is High

Gathering

- Open the session by leading the group in prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *Taking the Lowest Place* found in Luke 14:7-11.

Sharing

- Ask the class to engage in personal reflection for a few moments over the questions: have you ever been elevated from a lowly to a high place? What about being demoted from a high place to a lower place? What were the circumstances? How did you feel? Ask for volunteers to briefly share their thoughts and feelings.

Listening and Reflecting

- From inward reflection, move the focus to thinking critically about *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Before beginning discussion, it may be helpful to spend a few minutes reviewing the text. Share a section that gave you found insightful or review Jesus' response to earthly authority.
- Discuss the questions Kraybill includes for Chapter Eleven (found on pages 261-262). Allow several minutes for discussion, then reconvene and summarize important points that have been brought up.
- Ask for a volunteer to read out loud from the text. Read three paragraphs on page 238 starting with the paragraph that begins "The Christian perspective... ."
- In this chapter, Kraybill poses questions about social ladders in our churches that are difficult for us to answer. Why are these questions troubling to us? Sometimes we feel guilty because of our social position. How do we turn guilt or other negative

feelings into positive actions for God's reign on earth?

Sending

- End with a prayer encouraging each other to put words into action by elevating the lowly in your church, community, and the world.
- Assign the twelfth chapter of *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (pages 241-256) for the next session.

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Chapter 12

Successful Failures

Gathering

- Begin the final session by asking the class to join in reciting the Lord's Prayer.
- For the New Testament reading ask for a volunteer to read aloud *The Parable of the Lost Sheep* found in Luke 15:1-7.

Sharing

- Kraybill weaves principles of Jubilee throughout *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. Have the class draw together the twelve chapters by making connections between Jesus' ministry and principles of Jubilee.

Listening and Reflecting

- From reviewing the entire book, focus the discussion on the last chapter. To open the discussion, talk about what Kraybill calls Jesus' "basin ministry."
- Discuss the questions Kraybill includes for Chapter Twelve (found on page 262). Divide into smaller groups if necessary, then regroup to summarize the highlights of the discussions.
- Ask for a volunteer to read aloud from the chapter. Read the section "Habits of the Kingdom Community" on pages 255-256. Have the class read together the "Pledge of Allegiance" on page 256.
- Some churches still practice ritual foot washing. Whether or not your church does, what are ways of putting the principles of Jesus' basin ministry into practice?
- Another question you may want to ask the class in closing is: what is at least one attitude or practice you have adopted since taking this course? Or, what in your life has changed or will change because of this course?

Sending

- For this final session, close with a song, prayer, special reading, or your own way of sending the class to proclaim the good news of God's upside-down kingdom.