



# Simply to Flourish

## Imaginative Gridlock | 5:2-16

September 17, 2023

Prelude – So Good to Me by Cory Asbury

Welcome/Announcements

- Meeting & Dinner
- Series Resources
  - **Entering Awareness Group:** looking at everyday conversations to reveal the anxious beliefs undermining the fruit of our faith in Christ. 5 – Mondays (7-8:30) @ the Holsomback's beginning Sept. 25th
  - **Weekly Practices & Resources:** In the App & On the Website
  - **Collective Prayers:** The Lord's Prayer

## CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 1:1-3

Blessed is the person who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Song #1 – Psalm 145 by Dustin Kensrue and Stuart Townend

Song #2 – Your Love is Strong by Jon Foreman

Dismiss Kids

## PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 5:2-16

And Jesus opened his mouth and taught his disciples, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

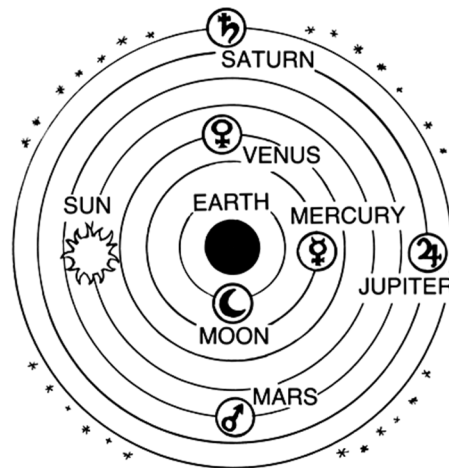
# SERMON |

Did you know that for some fourteen to fifteen centuries, the vast majority of the world was under the impression that the world existed only north of the equator, continuously from east to west?



*Ptolemy's map* was the image of the world from which most of Europe and Eastern Asia operated. Not just ideologically but practically. The vision of the world shaped economics and politics, framed the questions asked and the answers surmised. It impacted innovation, explorative trade routes, and even aspirations and expectations of life itself.

During the same millennia, under the influence of *Ptolemy's model* of the universe, people also believed that other planets and the sun revolved around the earth.



Beyond the hubris of the assumption, the ideas formed by such an image again shaped the issues and opportunities of the day. What could be studied and how, why, and to what end. What questions could be asked and ones that could not.

**The map and the model were the navigational tools of the day**—a day that lasted between 1300 and 1500 years—**leading people into the perceived problems and solutions, dreams, and complications of everyday existence.** In other words, Ptolemy's map and model shaped the imagination of the Middle Ages.

James K.A. Smith describes imagination as “a kind of faculty by which we navigate and make sense of the world, but in ways and on a register that flies below the radar of conscious reflection...Much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our *passional orientation to the world*...In short, **our action emerges from how we imagine the world.**”<sup>1</sup>

Yet imagination is not merely individual; it is social. Karen Swallow Prior argues, “culture...provides individuals with a precognitive framework—a framework that includes unconscious, unarticulated, and unstated underlying assumptions—that directs, shapes, and forms our thoughts and desires and imaginations in ways we don’t necessarily recognize...think of [these as] **the unseen parts that form the structure of a house.**”<sup>2</sup>

So, while not everyone was pulling out Ptolemy’s pictures to chart their daily existence, the individual and social “houses” of the day were constructed on and from a particular vision of how the world works. It’s hard to believe, I know, but these concepts were engrained as religious and educated facts for much of Europe to Eastern Asia for centuries. So ingrained into the heart were these maps and models that to challenge them was considered heresy, which is why, even a hundred years after both assumptions had been evidentially demonstrated as off the mark, when Gallileo offered to let people see for themselves a universe different, offering them a chance to look through the telescope themselves (a rarer opportunity than we can today fathom), there were people who actually “refused even to peek.”

Much of the “educated” or Western world prior to the Renaissance couldn’t envision a world different, much less all that world could contain, the things they didn’t even know to ask or desire, beyond what the maps and models that had permeated their development for centuries. The disciples gathered around Jesus’ feet on the mountainside were no less imaginatively blocked, ironically, by maps and models of life with God, and others perpetuated for nearly the same time frame (Moses to Jesus is about 1400 years).

They could not envision God’s kingdom coming without a geopolitical power center. They could not envision the kingdom’s arrival mixed and muddled in the dirt of multiculturalism. They could not envision the kingdom’s arrival without perfect harmony, containing continued suffering and striving and sowing and laboring and wrestling. They could hardly conceive a kingdom that was not grand and gaudy, political and powerful, not a place but people in relationship. And they certainly couldn’t envision life with God and others where they were not the center.

And like the assumptions of the centuries to follow, their navigational tools shaped everything about their daily living—the economics they engaged in or did not, the places they settled or did not, the questions they asked, the issues they perceived, and the solutions they sought. Like the systems of later centuries, the disciples gathered around Jesus were **bound by emotional or imaginative barriers, myths of how the world was oriented, and thus anxious and restless, considering the resolutions to their perceived problems and opportunities never actually changed their life experience.**

Have you ever felt that way? Like you cannot break through the problems or get to the treasure of the moment—whether in relation to your spouse or children, in your work or with co-workers, employees or employers, or even in the societal and situational circumstances that recycle through our daily living? Well, welcome to humanity! No, seriously, what is true of our collective existence prior to Copernicus and circumnavigation of the actual world and what was true of the first-century Jews that made up Jesus’ little

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<sup>1</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Imaging The Kingdom: how worship works*, 19, 31-32.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Swallow Prior, *The Evangelical Imagination: how stories, images, & metaphors created a culture in crisis*, 15-16.

band and interested crowds is true of you and me today: both in our big picture of the world and our daily living. Whether “Old World,” or “Old Covenant,” or “Old Self,” the move from what is perceived to what is revealed is fraught with anxiety.

What we are contending in this series is that these under-the-surface forces, which include frameworks of life with God and others, forming our imaginations, have cultivated not a life at peace, flourishing in the presence of God (Ps. 1 & 92), but a life of anxiousness and restlessness. And much like the disciples listening to Jesus on the mountainside, in the words of Willie James Jennings, “Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination.”<sup>3</sup> And, as Prior argues, “It is not simply that Christianity...[is] infected by other ideologies and identities—it’s also that too often we don’t recognize their undue influence on our beliefs, narratives, images, traditions, and institutions,”<sup>4</sup> in the practical and everyday ways in which we attempt to live by faith.

One of the first things we notice when walking through the gate of awareness, looking under the surface, is that our anxiousness/unrest often is the fruit of Imaginative Gridlock. Rabbi and family therapist Edwin Friedman argues that a hallmark of a person or people withering in anxiety and unrest is what he calls “Imaginative Gridlock,”<sup>5</sup> evidenced by three characteristics. See if any of these speak to you and your relational world.

#### SIGNS OF IMAGINATIVE GRIDLOCK | building on “old” maps & models

- Unending Treadmill of Trying Harder
- Either-or-Thinking & False Dichotomies
- Cycling Through Answers Instead of Reframing Questions

#### 1. UNENDING TREADMILL OF TRYING HARDER |

Friedman describes the trying harder treadmill as “a fly perpetually bouncing off a window it can see right through, with the result that despite its thousand eyes its perseverance gets it nowhere.” Though it can see what is on the other side of the glass and will give all its effort to get there, it simply cannot force its way through the invisible barrier.

The condition,” continues Friedman, “is well known to marriage partners who keep trying harder to change their partners, parents...trying harder to change their children, therapists trying harder to change their clients, teachers trying harder to change their students, clergy trying harder to change their congregations, managers who keep trying harder to change those they manage, CEO’s...trying harder to change their managers, consultants...trying harder to change CEOs, and social scientists who keep trying harder to explain what is happening...”

The treadmill of trying harder is driven,” argues Friedman, “by the assumption that failure is due to the fact one did not try hard enough, use the right technique, or get enough information. The assumption

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<sup>3</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: theology and the origins of race*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Prior, 30.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: leadership in the age of the quick fix*, 33-56.

overlooks the possibility that thinking processes are struck in imaginative gridlock.” **Our orientation to the world and others in the world is actually the thing that is not working.**

At its worst, the treadmill does what running in place often does: fixes our attention on an arbitrary and ultimately inconsequential goal—whether the goal is distance or time over distance or something particular changed in a specific person/situation—rather than the real reason for running: our health. The world in Ptolemy’s map and model was fixated on the “Northwest Passage” connecting the East and the West and nearly missed the more important accidentally discovered middle. The Jewish people, likewise, were fixated on being ready for God’s return and so were consumed with the rules and regulations assumed necessary for preparation, missing the heart of God’s experienced absence, the motivation for His promised return, and the surprise of His actual presence with them.

## 2. EITHER-OR-THINKING & FALSE DICHOTOMIES |

Our fixation on goals (change in others/situations) and the means of those limited/incomplete goals often foster polarization: “all-or-nothing ways of thinking [and relating to others] that eventually restrict the options of the mind. [If they don’t do this or that in this or that way, there is no way forward.] [People’s particular operation patterns] that might begin simply as theoretical differences become hardened into intense, oppositional, emotional commitments over even the most unemotional subject matter.”

Friedman contends, “Such intense polarizations...are always symptomatic of underlying emotional processes [imaginations of the world and how we build/cultivate a life within that imagined world]...rigid dichotomies almost always hint that there is something wrong in the *original orientation*.”

Polarization that permeates our culture is not new to humanity. In Jesus’ day, multiple factions within the Jewish community differed with such intensity that even cordially associating with a person from another group was seen as a betrayal to your group. This isolating thinking led to false dichotomies: either end Rome (said the Zealots) or be ended. Either play the game (said the Sadducees) or be played by it. Either separate (said the Essenes) or be incorporated. Either keep the law (said the Pharisees) or keep God away. Like the problem solvers mapping out the route between Europe and Japan in the years leading to Columbus, the groups in Jesus day could not imagine a third possibility to life whole and holy—**another piece of land between where they were and where they wanted to be.**

And so, they, like us, miss the truth that Friedman points out, “the differences in any system, whether it is a marriage or a legislature, rarely determine the intensity of the differing. Whether one is baking a cake or examining an institutional mix, **the interaction of ingredients is almost always a function of the temperature and pressure of the environment.** When troubled couples...make a breakthrough, often the issues they differed over have not gone away, but the two sides have become less reactive to the differences.” They’ve turned down the heat and pressure heightened on the treadmill, often because they have reframed the question.

- Unending Treadmill of Trying Harder
- Either-or-Thinking & False Dichotomies
- Cycling Through Answers Instead of Reframing Questions

### 3. CYCLING THROUGH (NON)ANSWERS RATHER THAN REFRAMING THE QUESTIONS |

Fridman argues that “In the search for the solution to any problem, questions are always more important than answers, because the way one frames the question or the problem, predetermines the range of answers one can conceive in response.” If your map and model say that the only way to your desired destination is *through* these people, overcoming those people or issues or limitations, even yourself., then you’ll only conceive of answers that have you get what you want by going *through* those people: i.e., fighting with, eliminating, compromising, oppressing, avoiding, taking advantage of those people. What is true of nations and groups is true of marriages and office relations, friendships, spirituality, and parenting.

A typical story, found Friedman, is “the mother who is perpetually trying to seek answers to the question of how to make her child more responsible. She will be on a frustrating treadmill until she is able to focus on her own development rather than her child’s. For example, one mother spent years trying to find new ways of getting her kids to do their homework despite the fact that she knew she had been completely ineffectual. Finally, one day, she said to them, ‘This is crazy. You’re going to save me a lot of money if you don’t go to college. From now on, every time you catch me commenting on your schoolwork, you can fine me a dollar.’ As a result of reframing the question from ‘how do I motivate my kids’ to ‘how do I regulate myself,’ she not only found them doing far better, but a chronic backache that had bothered her for years mysteriously disappeared.”

The chronic anxiety of emotionally persistent effort for the right/only answers that break through the invisible barrier of changing another for life to be good but was actually the wrong question/problem, kept this mother (and her family) from flourishing. She was bound by the inability to see another way. And Jesus knew that for his disciples, as well as for you and me, to truly experience the fruit of our faith, from life in the “New World” or “New Covenant” or “New Self,” a life of flourishing and not withering, of prospering in all that we do, we, like this mom, need an imaginative breakthrough.

So, how do we get to this breakthrough? And more specifically, how do Jesus’ words help us get there?<sup>6</sup>

#### JESUS WORDS:

1. Turn off the Treadmill (“Already...yours)
2. Turn down the Temp (Opposition Isn't the issue)
3. Reframe the Question

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<sup>6</sup> Much of the “language” and meaning work in this section was walked through in detail and referenced in a previous series, “A Kingdom Portrait: the sermon on the mount” which you can watch, listen to, and read [here](#).



First, **Jesus addresses the try-harder treadmill.** Jesus' word we translate as "Blessed," is not a word seeking something; it is, as Raymond Brown points out, "not part of a wish and not to invoke a blessing. Rather [it] recognizes an existing state of happiness or good fortune."<sup>7</sup>

The first statement of each Beatitude "affirm a quality of spirituality that is already present," [a wholeness and completeness that already exists], and "the second statement affirms a future that allows [us] even now to live a happy life."<sup>8</sup>

We should not read, "Blessed are the people who do X because they will receive Y,"<sup>9</sup> but rather:

- Already happy are you utterly dependent on God's presence and power, for you have it.
- Already favored are you who feel the losses in life; for refreshment, strength is yours.
- Already whole are you appropriately angry and evidently gentle, for you are at peace amid chaos.
- Already happy are you whose truest (always there) desire drives you, for you have your daily fill.
- Already favored are you who illogically and inconceivably forgive, for you have what you share.
- Already whole are your laborers for wholeness and health, for you're living on your inheritance, your vocation, what was made for you and given to you.
- Already happy are you in conflict with the old world/self maps and models, for your living in/by something new.
- Already happy, favored, whole are you in the run-ins and put-downs, for **you are distinctively with Jesus**—for those blessed to be a blessing, called to call others, shown to reveal in word and deed a world different, has always been a life with a bit of tang.

In taking us off the try-harder treadmill (there's nowhere to run if you're already there), **Jesus turns down the temperature and pressure of the find-it, fix-it, get-it-right vision of the Kingdom.**

#### JESUS WORDS:

1. Turn off the Treadmill ("Already...yours)
2. Turn down the Temp (Opposition Isn't the issue)
3. Reframe the Question

Notice how Jesus addresses the second characteristic of imaginative gridlock, the either/or dichotomy of life with God that conflates happiness and wholeness (peace) with a lack of differences/conflicts between others, authority, and personal responsibility.

Living a Whole & Holy, Full & Forever Life Includes Being:

1. Utterly dependent
2. Mournful b/c you suffer & cause suffering
3. Angry for good reason
4. Daily-longing

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Kenneth E. Bailey, "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: cultural studies in the gospels," 67-68.

<sup>88</sup> Bailey, 68.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

5. Needing forgiveness (mercy)
6. Relationally responsible with God
7. Responsible for cultivating health & wholeness
8. Harassed
9. Reviled, persecuted, falsely spoken of

Essentially, Jesus removes the other as an obstacle to life whole and holy, not by assuming that life will be without difficulty but rather that **the difficulty of getting what/where we desire is itself not the thing that keeps us from reaching our destination, getting what we desire.** A whole and holy, full and forever life with God and others, the life we desire that we can see on the other side of the glass, is not a life free from difficulty or reasonability; it is filled with it, *so difficulty and responsibility are not keeping us from it.*

#### JESUS WORDS:

1. Turn off the Treadmill ("Already...yours")
2. Turn down the Temp (Opposition Isn't the issue)
3. Reframe the Question

In turning down the temperature and pressure, the intensity to perceived opposition, **Jesus takes head on the final evidence of chronic anxiety—a fixation on fixes rather than reframing questions.** And doing so allows us to be reoriented to a "New World," giving us a different map and model of life with God and others.

#### A NEW MAP & MODEL

- "Blessed...for they" (5:2-11)
- "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father..." (5:13-16)

**The first and final thing Jesus does is change the question.** "Bless-ed," already happy, favored, and whole, puts us squarely in the place we desire to be, and "*you are the salt of the earth...the light of the world...*" draws us purposefully into the flow of the movement. You are salt and light; **you are purposeful—already** in all you are and all you are in the middle of. You are distinct (whole and holy, tangy and revealing)...simply by living in His life and presence.

#### REFRAMED QUESTION

- Old Questions: How do I become happy? How do I get to my purpose?
- New Question: *What dilutes or covers the person and state in which I already exist?*

So the question is no longer how do I become happy (do and overcome to be happy) or even how do I get to my purpose (to where I am living it/doing it); it is *what dilutes or covers the person and state in which I already exist?* This sounds like what Paul learned, the secret to facing whatever is or is about to be.

...I have learned in whatever situation **I am to be content...**I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11, 13)

Contentment is a **state of self-sufficiency** in relationship with Life itself...the experience of being sufficient within, possessing the ability/competence to flourish in my life, in every circumstance in which my life is lived, because I am "distinctively with Jesus."



## REFLECTION & COMMUNION INVITE |

How are you experiencing Imaginative Gridlock? **What dilutes or covers your:**

- utter dependence on God's presence and power?
- mourning life-less in others and yourself?
- appropriate anger/passion with evident gentleness?
- truest (always there) desire/drive?
- illogical and inconceivable forgiveness?
- your labor for wholeness and health for others?
- your conflicting with the old world/self maps and models?
- your run-ins and put-downs because you are distinctively (salt and light) with Jesus?

I will re-read the prompt (adding in the already's), and as I do, pay attention to your heart rate, racing thoughts, and tightening stomach. Better because, like self-sufficiency, self-awareness is relational, only actually helpful in relationship; let's **ask the Spirit to examine our hearts and know our disquieting (anxious) thoughts and see if there is any way that we are building our lives that lead to grieving rather than flourishing.**

I'll read the paraphrased Beatitudes slowly; if/when you feel your heartbeat quicken, your mind start racing, or your stomach tighten, stop listening to me and ask the Spirit to show you what's happening.

- What contexts (people, places, situations) or memories do these words and your feelings bring to mind?
- Why do Jesus' words unsettle your heart?

I'll give you a few minutes to listen to the Spirit's examination and leading. **When the music begins to play, that is your cue to make your way to the table and receive the elements of communion. Hold on to them as you return to your seat and remain standing as we sing together.**

### BEATITUDES | THE NEW MAP & MODEL

- Already happy are you utterly dependent on God's presence and power, for you have it.
- Already favored are you who feel the losses in life, for refreshment and strength are yours.
- Already whole are you appropriately angry and evidently gentle, for you are at peace amid chaos.
- Already happy are you whose truest (always there) desire drives you, for you have your daily fill.
- Already favored are you who illogically and inconceivably forgive, for you have what you share.
- Already whole are your laborers for wholeness and health, for you're living on your inheritance, your vocation, what was made for you and given to you.
- Already happy are you in conflict with the old world/self maps and models, for your living in/by something new.
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## Song #3 – Running In Circles by United Pursuit

### COMMUNION with CORPORATE CONFESSION |

Our Father in heaven, hallowed is your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

We receive from you all we need for life today, knowing there is plenty more for tomorrow.

We're forgiven, and so we forgive. Led not into the conflicts within and quarrels between, but delivered from all that thievers life.

Yours is the only and forever Kingdom and power and glory;

all of which you graciously share with us through Your Son.

In His life, we live. Amen.

## Song #4 – I Shall Not Want by Audrey Assad

### BENEDICTION | Ephesians 3:20-21

As we conclude the day made for us, we enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering:

...to God our Father, who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or imagine, according to the power at work within us, to God be glory in Christ City Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.