

## *Defying Gravity*

### *“When We Get It Right”*

[Luke 16:10-13](#)

Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, is one of the most important rulers in Chinese history. He became king of the state of Qin when he was only 13 years old. And he became emperor of China in 221 BC at the age of 38 after he conquered and unified all of the other warring states, putting an end to feudalism. He would continue to rule the Qin dynasty for 11 more years until he died.

Qin Shi Huang was known to be a brutal tyrant who had aggressive political ambitions and expansive goals for his country. He standardized Chinese characters, measurements, and currency. He built a massive new national road system. The Great Wall, which he built to protect the Northern part of China from foreign invaders, is now one of the several wonders of the world. Clearly, he had a profound influence on Chinese history and culture.

But, his most stunning project only came to light in 1974 when local farmers uncovered strange figures while digging a well. Excavations have since revealed sections of a grand funerary complex, filled with sculptures that depict Qin Shi Huang's army. The super large collection of life-size sculptures of the emperor's warriors and horses is called the Terracotta Army.

Despite his great accomplishments, Qin Shi Huang constantly worried about his own death. He had an obsessive fear of assassination and longing for longevity. He even sent out his ministers to search for an elixir of immortality. When he finally accepted that he would die one day after all, the emperor decided to use his wealth and power to build a city-sized mausoleum for himself.

He ordered craftsmen to create the life-sized Terracotta Army sculptures, so that they could protect him in the afterlife. Scholars believe it took almost 40 years and millions of laborers to build the army. By the time Qin Shi Huang died in 210 b.c., his mausoleum was surrounded by more than 8,000 clay soldiers, along with horses and chariots, and civilian figures, as well. It's amazing to see the pictures and diagrams of the Terracotta Army. I marvel at the time and resources that the emperor spent on himself, trying to secure his eternal rest.

About two hundred years after Qin Shi Huang, a Jewish rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth taught people about a different king of kings. Instead of a warrior, conquering king, he spoke of a good shepherd -- one who ruled over a kingdom called the kingdom of God. Like Qin Shi Huang, Jesus brought people together, but not as a nation contained within a physical boundary or a dynasty based on birthright. Rather, Jesus welcomed people into a kingdom that would go beyond all national boundaries and unite people across time.

Instead of teaching people to amass fortune and power in this life or creating a false sense of security for the afterlife, Jesus taught his followers to be generous with love, forgiveness, and kindness. He taught them to be weary of the unusual gravity of material possessions that would draw them away from God's kingdom.

He spoke in parables: simple, earthly stories that disguised deeper spiritual truths. One such story was about a man who had an abundant harvest. It was so good in fact that he needed to build a bigger barn to contain his bounty. He thought to himself, "Hey, with this accumulated wealth, I can sit back and relax." He thought he could just eat, drink, and be merry!

But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Jesus finishes the story with this warning: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." ([Luke 12:20-21](#) NRSV)

Qin Shi Huang built the ultimate barn for himself, a palace mausoleum guarded by Terracotta Warriors whom he thought would support and protect him throughout eternity. However, despite the earthly resources and meticulous planning he devoted toward his final resting place, his man-made kingdom of clay slowly broke apart. All the beautiful colors on the statues faded away as soon as they were excavated.

How unfortunate for the emperor that Jesus was not one of his trusted advisors! May his loss be our gain. Jesus tells us to be rich toward God, specifically warning us to "not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." ([Matthew 6:19-21](#) NRSV)

Why did Jesus teach us these things? We know that his ministry was to release the captives and give recovery of sight to the blind ([Luke 4:18](#) NRSV). In many ways, our attachments to earthly possessions keep us in chains and prevent us from seeing the Kingdom of God already in our midst. Jesus seeks to liberate us to the reality that we do not have to wait until we die to experience the Kingdom of Heaven, for it is not just a far-off place where we move into after we die, like in the hymn, "I'll fly away" which is often heard at funeral/memorial services.

Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away;  
to a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.  
I'll fly away, O glory, I'll fly away.  
When I die hallelujah by and by, I'll fly away.

Friends, Jesus Christ boldly proclaims to us that the kingdom of God is already present in the here and now. Whenever we do the will of God and align our lives with God's love and purposes, we find ourselves in God's kingdom. We have no fear of death because Jesus' offer of salvation, once received and experienced, secures our lives into eternity!

Jesus tells us to live a life generous in every way, for it is in our giving of ourselves with our gifts and talents that we encounter the assurance of our salvation. We experience firsthand the everlasting joy and peace that is a foretaste of what it might be to spend eternity with God. What a blessing it is to behold the Kingdom of God in the goodness of life we live here and now!

There was a second reason Jesus taught his followers to be generous: he wants you and me to bless others through our generosity. Rather than gather our resources just for ourselves, he wants us to be a launch pad for other people. You may be wondering what I mean by being a launch pad for others. Let's watch this video. (*Show the video clip #4, "Blob."*)

*(During the video)*

The inflated raft-looking thing is called the "blob." One person sits on the end of the blob, and it's not that much fun until a second person jumps off from the top. When the second person lands on the blob, the first person is launched to great heights.

Now here comes Tony. Of course, he understands the concept but is not so crazy about heights. He is hesitant to jump because of his fear. Look at the other people. As you can see, everyone is enjoying jumping. By jumping, the kids are launching others and being launched themselves. Everyone is having a great time. But Tony is not sure about this...

After so much pondering and walking back and forth with great reluctance, he finally does it. Without being pushed, Tony takes the risk and jumps. He launches someone off the blob. Now, he is in the position where he can be launched into the air. Look at his face. That expression is much better than when he was hesitating on the platform, doesn't it?

*(After the video)*

When you are generous with what you have (your time, your talents, and your money), you bless other people. You launch other people. You lift them up. And, you also discover that by jumping boldly, you are positioned to being launched yourself. By lifting up others, you are lifted up, too. This is what our church is seeking to do, and that's what I witnessed last night at the home of Jim and Daelene Groff.

As you know they direct our choirs, both children and adults, vocal and bell. Every year, they open their home to the choir members and their families for a Halloween party. As usual, all those who attended the party had a great time together. From the beautiful Halloween decorations I saw inside and outside of their house, I am sure Daelene (and Jim) spent so many hours getting their place ready for the party. And, they probably had to stay up late, cleaning up afterwards. Yet, they looked very happy last night, going around to make sure that everyone was having a blast. They also had to come to church so early this morning for the bell choir rehearsal. And they still look happy! You see, as they blessed and lifted up others, they were raised up too! I can tell you that I see every day and every week many other happy faces of our church family who are generous with their time, gifts, labor, and money.

Here is another example of blessing and being blessed through generosity. Elaine Bondano who coordinates Art and Spirit Ministry at Main and Elmwood Jail wrote this in her email: “One week, when I was reviewing what we had done previously with one of these groups, I asked what they took away from the class. One man raised up his arms and said, “You came and just loved us.” Wow... The program and unwavering dedication of the volunteers has continued to be a meaningful, successful, and soul-developing experience for all involved... We are extremely grateful to Campbell United Methodist Church for all the support it has provided over these last 7 years, both financially and with volunteer time.”

Do you see? When you are generous with what you have, like in the video, you launch others. You bless them. You lift them up. And, in return, you too are blessed and lifted up. This is why Jesus calls us to be generous.

However, many of us have not entered this life of generosity because we are just like Tony on the platform in the video. We think, ‘If I am generous with anything, my time, my talent, my money, I will not have enough for me and my family.’ If we overcome this fear and take the plunge into a life of generosity, we will become catapults, lifting up someone else to experience joy.

For many of us, the hardest thing to be generous with is our money. We say to ourselves, “I can't lower my lifestyle. I can't pull back. If I change my lifestyle, I might not have enough for my future. I might not be able to have what I want. I might not be happy.”

We must remember that Jesus warned us about the spiritual blindness caused by money, wealth, and possessions. Let us hear again his words from today's scripture reading: “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” ([Luke 16:13](#) NIV).

Qin Shi Huang created the Terracotta Army to extend his lifestyle into the afterlife. He spent his fortune and power for this purpose. But, his life ended when he was buried alongside the eight thousand clay soldiers. On the contrary, Jesus did not accumulate anything but gave everything away, even his own life. Yet, we proclaim him resurrected, alive evermore! Not only is he himself alive, but he also ushers all those who believe in him to life, including you and me.

As we come to the conclusion of our worship series, Defying Gravity, its namesake song from the musical, Wicked, comes to mind. Here are some of its lyrics:

It's time to try defying gravity  
I think I'll try defying gravity  
And you can't pull me down!

I'm through accepting limits

'cause someone says they're so  
Some things I cannot change  
But till I try, I'll never know!  
Too long I've been afraid of  
Losing love I guess I've lost.  
Well, if that's love  
It comes at much too high a cost!

I'd sooner buy  
Defying gravity  
Kiss me goodbye  
I'm defying gravity  
And you can't pull me down...

As we make our financial commitments towards our ministries next year, may we align ourselves with Jesus Christ, who leads us into life in the here and now, as well as the eternal rest to come in our heavenly home. May you experience heavenly joy and peace as you take a leap of faith and defy financial gravity!  
Thanks be to God! Amen.