

# GOD-CENTERED

by Steve Zeisler

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Perhaps you were as captivated as I was by the commemoration of the D-Day invasion of France when thousands of heroic soldiers lost their lives fifty years ago. Leaders of nations from all around the world, including President Clinton expressed deep emotion as they stood on the shores of Normandy. Today's leaders didn't fight in World War II, and as they looked back they found themselves humbled by the courage of that prior generation.

Will Bill Clinton's generation (my own) be praised and thanked by today's young people? Will there be any wreaths laid in recognition of something we did that was filled with heroic endeavor? Will we have done anything that anyone will remember or care about? Today's young people may have it even worse than my generation. This summer also marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Woodstock. Is that what we will be remembered for? The longing to live lives of value and worth runs deep.

In reality, though fifty years is not long enough to measure a life. The question ought to be, will eternity---ten thousand times ten thousand years---recognize us as having made choices that were glorious and worthy? When the new heavens and the new earth descend and we are with our Lord in glory, will the angels sing songs about our lives and remember us? In that day will there be a sense that we lived for something worthwhile?

As we examine the Sermon on the Mount, we are hearing a very clear challenge. If we hear from Jesus what matters to him in the world his Father has made, and allow this challenge to captivate us, we will indeed live in a way that is worthwhile from the perspective of eternity. We will live lives that will be forever praised.

In the first four Beatitudes Jesus described the discovery of human failure and inadequacy: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the spiritually bankrupt. Blessed are those who mourn their spiritual poverty. Blessed are those who refuse to be defensive. And blessed are those who live with a continuing sense of hunger and thirst for righteousness. These beatitudes are about honestly coming face-to-face with what we are not and what we ought to be, acknowledging our need. And once we understand our need and declare it to ourselves and to the world, God's response is to do something about it. There is a blessing on the poor in spirit---theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Mourning leads to comfort. Meekness leads to a real inheritance. Hunger and thirst lead to real satisfaction. The response of God brings life.

## **God's presence makes the difference**

Let's look now at three simple statements in Matthew 5:7-9, in which Jesus continues his teaching about where blessing lies:

Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called sons of God.

These are statements about engaging in life in a proper way. Notice that even though these are positive statements, they are not popular statements. The world cheers the ruthless not the merciful. It cheers hypocrites and effective liars not the pure in heart. It cheers the winners not the peacemakers. However, having learned of our need, we are made new and sent out into the world with a godly purpose. It is these lives that will be

remembered with wreaths not just fifty years from now, but in eternity, with the approval of God and all that goes with that. The merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers, who challenge their world, are people who have found out what life is really worth living for.

The difference between the recognition of inadequacy and lives that have a proper purpose is the presence of God. Verse 7 says,

"Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will receive mercy."

That is, they will be shown mercy by God; they will know the mercy-filled presence of God. Verse 8 says,

"Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God."

The idea here is about being the same person that you are on the outside all the way into your heart; being unhypocritical. What has been added for the pure in heart that wasn't there before is again the living God, to be known, apprehended, and followed. Verse 9:

"Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called the sons of God."

The peacemakers have an identity that has been founded on God himself. Every one of us at some level will discover who we are by discovering whose child we are. Most of us have names that we received from our parents, and, more importantly, an inner sense of who we are that we received from them. Jesus is saying here that peacemakers are those who discover that their Father is the Lord God himself; their identity is in him. So what has been added to life is God-centeredness.

## **God acts first**

Before we examine each of these statements individually, let me ask you to consider the logic of them. If you knew nothing else about the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, the face value of these statements would appear to be, if you act a certain way then God will respond to your action. So if you will do your best to be merciful--to find some sad and benighted people to care about, make room in your life for them, do acts of mercy to them, have thoughts of mercy, and so on--then God will measure your performance, and if he finds that you have done well enough, he will be merciful to you. But that is not what these statements mean. Rather, Jesus is describing those who are in the middle of a process of being changed by God that he himself has initiated. They have already discovered God's caring for them and investment in them, and they have begun to be changed by that; and the very change allows them to know more of the care and investment of God. Jesus is talking about those who are acting on what they have been given and who are given more as a result.

In my freshman year in college I lived on the same dorm hall as a couple of guys who were both in love. One of them was in love with a girl in our dorm who barely knew he existed. But he cut her picture out of the freshman picture book and pasted it on his wall. When I talked to him at times, he would be pining away with longing to know this girl. He would think great thoughts of her and write poems to her that he never did anything with. Either he would be filled with romantic longing from a distance, or he would do something awkward in an effort to get her attention and make a fool of himself. His efforts to win her favor resulted in no more than a scornful look from her.

His efforts didn't create love, the other guy would sit down each night and write a letter to his beloved, who went to a different college. He had been going with her for two or three years before high school graduation. He received letters from her every day. He would hum romantic tunes when he thought of her, and he was completely filled with joy from this relationship. But it was a relationship that had already been established. She communicated her commitment and interest to him as often as he did to her. If you were to phrase this as a beatitude, you could predict about the second guy as he sat down every night to write a love letter to his

beloved, "Blessed are the writers of love letters, because they will receive love letters." He was writing to someone he loved because he knew he was loved.

That is what Jesus is saying here. He is talking not about those who are trying to establish a relationship, but those who already have one. The reason the merciful will receive mercy is that they have already received mercy, and that is the very thing that makes them merciful. So you can confidently say of someone who is kind to the brutalized and hurting for Jesus' sake, "Look at her---she knows God. She is already in a love relationship with him." That is the point of all of these beatitudes. We don't create conditions for blessing; we are in the midst of an interactive relationship of which God is the initiator.

Now let's examine more closely each of these three statements. If they can capture us, then they may define our lives so that someday in heaven, if not before, we can look back and see that the way we have lived is the way that is really worth living.

### **The recipients of mercy**

"Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will receive mercy."

Mercy in Scripture is about suffering; one is merciful to someone who is in pain, wretched, or lost. That situation is not something that most of us are attracted to immediately. Most of us avoid those who suffer. We feel as if their pain might rub off on us. It is not natural to find ourselves wanting to join someone in their struggle or hurt. But for those who have been honest enough to stop running from this life's hurts, who have fallen on their knees and asked God to meet their needs and who have received his mercy, it becomes reasonable to turn and offer what they have received to someone else.

Luke 18:10-13 is a parable that Jesus told:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men---robbers, evildoers, adulterers---or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said,

"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

One man had managed to live his life insulated from the fact that sin causes agony by using religious language and activity. And he took credit for it; even in his prayers he praised himself, not God. He never cried for mercy because he never let himself acknowledge how much he needed it.

The other man, had suffered for his choices. He had a sense of what sin can do and knew its pain. There are two elements to his prayer that are very important. First, he recognized how much he needed help. He could not help himself anymore. He was cut off and in agony because of it. Second, he recognized that God could be appealed to even then. He was not so hopeless that he didn't know where to turn. All he could say as he cried out for help was, "God, be merciful to me." He had enough hope in the goodness of God to cry for mercy. So when Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful," he is speaking of those who have recognized their need and who have begun to discover that God helps the merciful. And they will continue to receive mercy from him.

I hope to emphasize in these messages that we live in a day in which young people in particular are hurting. The world that they are inheriting is growing darker and darker. I cut out some lyrics by a heavy metal band named Machine Head that were printed in the newspaper. In these words there is plenty of pain, but there is no hope. What I fear very often for young people in the world we live in is that while they are articulate about pain, they don't believe that God or anyone else will help. These are the lyrics:

Your suffering is my wealth.  
I feed off pain, force-fed to love it,  
And now I swallow it whole.  
I will never live in the past.  
Let freedom ring with a shotgun blast.

Power, rage unbound  
Because I've been pounded by the streets.  
Cyanide blood burns down the skyline.  
Hatred is purity.  
The bullet connects at last.  
Let freedom ring with a shotgun blast.

But the truth is that there are people who can be merciful, because they have received mercy from a God who cares for people who are hurting. I hope as Jesus' words ring in our ears that, as our Lord commands us, we will find some way to care about young people.

### **A passion to see God**

"Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God."

Purity of heart has to do with becoming an honest person from top to bottom, a genuine person. The way they look in public is the way they are in private. They are able to reflect the glory of God on the outside, six inches deep into their soul, a foot deep into their soul, and as deep as you can go into their soul.

Jesus spoke a malediction on those who were what he called whitewashed tombs; they looked great on the outside, but inside they were full of rotteness and dead men's bones (see Matthew 23:27). The pure in heart are not like that. They have found a passion that has silenced every other passion. They are not double-minded. Being pure in heart is wanting just one thing. The pure in heart want to see God so desperately that they begin to see him everywhere. They want to understand him, to be near him, and to have a sense of who he is and to walk with him in this world every day.

When people care so much about seeing God that other things are set aside, they acquire a purity of heart; and then they begin to see God even more. They read the newspaper and see the hand of God in history. They see God's smile when watching a grandfather walk in the park with a toddler. They look at the stars of heaven and the mountains and see the handiwork of God.

Everywhere they go those who are pure in heart can't help but see God, and the more they see him, the more pure their heart is; and the more pure their heart is, the more they see him. Purity of heart leads to a life that is worth living, a life that will be praised, a life that will be valuable to the one who lives it and valuable to his Lord.

Yesterday, I served as the pastor in a beautiful wedding. It was a mixture of cultures---a family from Thailand, a family from Singapore, and a bit of California as well. Friends flew in from all over the world. My favorite moment in the whole event was when I invited the bride and groom to declare vows in the presence of friends and family, and this they did with bold voice, promising to love one another and trust God to be his servant in each other's lives. Based on that promise, I was able as a servant of Christ to pronounce them husband and wife, and I invited them to kiss one another. The groom lifted back the veil of his beloved and kissed her. Then he stepped back and sang a love song to her.

The veil was removed, and the groom saw his bride more clearly than he had been able to see her at any time during the ceremony. She was radiantly beautiful, and she felt cared about by him. Seeing her unveiled, he sang to her of his commitment. Now, it would have been horrible---of course it was the farthest thing from his mind---if he had been a hypocrite at that point; if he had been thinking of someone else as he sang to his bride.

But the very beauty of the moment was that he was seeing her clearly because he wanted nothing more than to be a blessing to his wife.

That is exactly what the Lord is talking about here. If Jesus Christ is our passion and we love him and long to see him everywhere, that is the very condition that produces purity of heart; and purity of heart produces still more awareness of the Lord. The veil is lifted. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that right now we see through a dark glass, but the day is coming when we will see him face-to-face. No matter how far we go in this life we will never see him as he is, but we can get closer to that; the glass can let more light through. Jesus is helping us here to have as one of the first principles of our life that the very most important thing is intimacy with God.

### **Being about our father's business**

"Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called sons of God."

Peacemakers are able to go everywhere in the world knowing who they are. There is no more identity crisis, no more wondering if they are worth anything. There is no trying to please a parent who will never be pleased. All that is done. (Women and men are both sons of God; it has nothing to do with gender. It has to do with identity, being the child of one's father.) To be able to go into any setting at any time knowing exactly who you are, and to have all the confidence that goes with that, makes life worth living again. We are back to the fact that having God at the center of everything grants us the opportunity, adventure, and joy.

Those who can be confident that God is their Father are those who are engaged in the business of peacemaking. Again, this is circular. It is confidence that God is our Father that makes us a peacemaker. And the more we are willing to be engaged as a peacemaker, the more aware we are that this is our Father's business that we are about: "I'm his son---of course I must be a peacemaker." He reinforces who we are, and that creates more response on our part, and so on.

We need to be careful to hear the language here. Jesus does not talk about truce-makers. A truce-maker can be just a negotiator who is very skilled at balancing opposition, so that as a marriage counselor, say, they teach husband and wife to be angry with each other at equal levels so that nobody gets to win the arguments all the time. A kind of truce prevails because neither can inflict too much pain on the other. Countries can have truces based on being antagonists that fear loss as much as they hope to win any conflict.

Jesus is not saying, further, that peace enthusiasts will be called sons of God. There are people who march, sing, talk, and write about peace because they are enthusiastic that peace should happen. They feel very strongly about it, but they can't do anything to make it happen.

James, Jesus' brother, asked this question (4:1): "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" In the long run, what causes quarrels and anger, warfare, or lack of peace always begins in the heart of the human individual. It is the reason brothers hate one another, husband and wife fight, neighbors can't get along, political parties sling mud at each other, ethnic groups can't stand each other, and nations war. It all goes back to the fact that there is a lack of peace in the human heart.

A peacemaker is someone who knows the answer to the turmoil inside the individual. He has a message of love from God that can grant real freedom, real change and renewal, and peace on the inside, so that for the first time the individual doesn't have to fight back. In just the same way that war and turmoil spread, blessing and hope can spread. As individuals are changed, so are communities, and by the grace of God the world is changed.

### **How shall I respond?**

My challenge to us as a congregation is to realize how much the world of young people around us needs people who know these things and can pass them on. Below are three statements that I would ask you to consider. If you have another calling in life or you are already doing what God wants you to do in this, they may have little application to you. If not, you may need to wrestle with the Lord as to whether there is

something that ought to be true of you that isn't. So I invite you to pray, think, and make notes as you read these statements. Give the Spirit of God an opportunity to stir around in your life.

- · What struggles did you have making sense of life when you were in junior and senior high school? What have you learned about life in Christ that you wish you had known then?
- · Assume that the Lord is going to make you eager to step out of your comfort zones and begin to minister to young people. What spiritual gifts, life experience, training, and open doors do you have that might suggest a **particular** way to get involved?
- · Will you let someone know what you have written here?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Who? \_\_\_\_\_

Carol Lind tells you below about her ministry as our pastor to junior high students at PBC. She has important things to say about what that has done for her. It is a story about how just one person's life has been touched. You could be involved in the same way she has been.

I did not grow up in a family who knew God. In fact, my parents found life fairly overwhelming, and they were not able to pass on wisdom about living in a community or being involved with people, because their fear levels were so high. I was told that to believe in God was stupid and to trust anyone was dangerous. I know what it is like to feel helpless, hopeless, and desperate and alone---so alone that life seems pointless and really impossible to live.

When I was seventeen years old someone told me that God was real. It was the first time I had heard that there was a living God who wanted to be vitally involved with my life. Of course I didn't believe it, but I was curious to hear more about it. So I prayed a simple prayer: "Lord, if you're real I really want to know you." God answered my prayer. (Carol Lind)

God takes the smallest amount of faith that we can put forward and blesses it beyond our wildest dreams if we are willing! I prayed, "If I can share this with just one other person in the world so that they can be spared the pain of living without God, it would be wonderful." I spent a lot of years learning and growing in my Christian life. God has opened more doors than I ever thought possible to share his life with people I have enjoyed my involvement here with youth, both elementary, and junior high.

One story that stands out particularly in my mind is a snow trip to Hume Lake that we took a number of teens on last year. There was a boy who was invited along on this trip by another boy from his football team. I knew nothing about this boy except that he got along really well with the rest of the group. On Saturday night of this retreat Hume Lake gave an altar call, and more than three hundred responded to the Lord. It was a tremendous blessing to be in the room and to watch all the life and activity. This boy was one from our group who went forward. Then at the Sunday morning service they asked if anyone wanted to stand up and share what had happened in their life.

He stood up in the midst of six hundred people, which takes a lot of courage for a seventh-grade boy, and said, "My mom died when I was six years old. My dad is very involved with his work. And now that I know that God is real, I know that I don't have to feel alone anymore." I felt then that God had really answered my prayer. And that boy's story will always stand out in my mind.

Life has not felt hopeless or pointless for a very long time. I was sharing with a friend last week that even in the midst of many difficulties and interesting circumstances that have surrounded my life lately, I have never felt more alive and joyful and felt closer to God. He promises us that if we look for him, he will be there, and he keeps his word.

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