

A RELEVANT COUNTER-CULTURE**Matthew 5:3-10****(Read Matthew 5:3-10)**

Intro: In August of 1969 my younger brothers and I spent a weekend at Lake Wallenpaupack in the Pocono Mountains with my Sunday School teacher and his family. He had four sons, all wild and crazy boys like us, and we had a great time. I remember as we made the 2 hour trip from our home to the lake we passed many hippies, more than usual, hitchhiking along the way. When we made a stop we asked one of the hitchhikers where they were headed, and why there were so many? The answer was, they were going to Woodstock. We had no idea what or where that was, but now we do. A half million people descended upon a farm in New York for a huge rock concert that mostly turned into a muddy orgy. It was a testimony to the wild and crazy sixties with its turning on and tuning out and rebellion against the values of previous generations. It was a counter culture.

This is all 50 years ago now and it's fading into our collective memories, but something was stirred during that time. The idea of counter culture no longer evokes the same kind of visceral response it once did. Once upon a time long hair was a detriment to one's job prospects, now to discriminate against anyone for anything (except being a Christian) will land a potential employer in a huge lawsuit. In the sixties Che Guevara was communist trouble maker and the hero of the counter culture, now you can find his face on a Tee shirt almost anywhere. In the sixties drugs were rampant and Time Magazine said God was dead. They were turbulent times.

It was also in the sixties that, increasingly religion was questioned. There was good reason. The church had been a participant in real and perceived ways in some of America's less savory history. There was the history of repression of workers and the church said little or nothing. Slavery had thrived for 300 years and the church had fought to protect it. More recently, she stood passively by and even stood against the Civil Rights movement and some economic reforms that would have helped the poor. In the minds of idealistic people, the church had been tried and found wanting. As a result, and in increasing measure, it had become less and less relevant in the minds of people who had more and more influence. Already in the early '70s there was a statistic that said that less than 1% of college professors were Christian. It's not wonder that many protests happened on college campuses.

The response from religious people took several forms. Some groups withdrew because they saw the world as more and more dangerous. Others reacted loudly and angrily and with great conviction and condemnation. Instead of being light in an increasingly dark world, many Christians cast a dark cloud over it.

We need to be neither the latter nor the former. We need to be a relevant counter-culture. Instead of running away or driving others away, we need to infiltrate society and be the salt of the earth. We need to be a culture that addresses a real world longing. We need to meet the need of a hurting world. To do this we take our example and our instruction from Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount – and especially from the text I just read called the Beatitudes.

One writer, referring to the Beatitudes, said *“this was Jesus, the revolutionary, heaving a verbal grenade.”* He was going against the conventional wisdom of the day and certainly contrary to the teaching of the religious establishment. It's funny though, Jesus really meant what he said here in this sermon – otherwise he was wasting his breath. He said these things because he intended his followers to live them. Yet, many seem to see the Beatitudes as impossible attitudes. They think *“They're really nice sayings, but really, who does them?”* The problem with such thinking is that Jesus was laying it out because it's what he expects of his followers. Jesus lived it. In F. B. Meyer's words, *“Jesus lived this life [described in the Beatitudes] before he described them.”* And he goes on to say that each of *“these dispositions do not purchase blessedness, but to cultivate them is to be blessed.”* In other words, when you have these attitudes, you WILL be blessed. In fact, Meyer points out something awesome – that the Beatitudes are 1 Corinthians 13 anticipated. That text, you might remember, was our scripture last Sunday.

Living this scripture is counter-cultural in a weary and despairing society. It's refreshing to say the least. If you respond with the attitudes described here, you will surprise people. They will be taken back. Just a brief look at each Beatitude will show what it means to be counter-cultural and how it can be applied to our lives. First . . .

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- Thomas Jefferson wrote in our Declaration of Independence *“that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”* We know our rights – they've been inculcated into us from as early as we can remember. It's

gotten to the point that we live in a world of entitlement. This is all true, but the most important truth is this – before God we stand in great need. No amount of unalienable rights will rescue us from it. We need Jesus. The world needs Jesus. The ground is level at the foot of the Cross and that's definitely counter to what the world thinks. This is the truth, realize your need before God and you will be blessed.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

- Phillip Keller in his book SALT FOR SOCIETY (which is a study of the Sermon on the Mount) describes what happened when his wife died (tell story). Because we always have the hope of Christ – our mourning will be turned into joy. This is the promise.
- But this is not the thinking of a despairing world. They experience no comfort in mourning because they have no hope. Paul showed the hope of the Christ Follower that we can pass on. In fact, in his words we can encourage one another. Listen, *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.* 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. This is the blessedness, the comfort we can share.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

- It's funny that there are two predominate ways Christians are perceived and sometimes we even act like it. Both are opposite of what Jesus is saying we are to be. Many see us as bullies who shout judgment outside the abortion clinic or as milquetoast and shrinking back in the face of strength. Jesus was neither. Contrary to how he is sometimes portrayed, he is not Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild. He's also not a manly man oozing machismo. He is Mighty God, He is what is needed at the moment. We are not God, but we have his Spirit. So like him we are not wimps – we are powerhouses under control of the Master. That is what meekness means.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

- This is tremendously counter-cultural. In a Me-Culture it realizes one's need for what only God can provide. The kind of righteousness Jesus is talking about here is diametrically opposite of our culture's "If it feels good, do it." and "Your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth." shows that right is self-determined. And the problem with making your own rules and determining your own righteousness is that it leaves you incredibly empty.
- Jesus says that those who seek after his righteousness and WILL be filled. In fact, later in this same sermon, after addressing the concern of how one is fed and clothed, he says, *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* Matthew 6:33. Those who seek after righteousness will be filled, because they are hungry for the right things

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

- Aesop told the fable of the mouse and the lion. Remember it?
A Lion lay asleep in the forest, his great head resting on his paws. A timid little Mouse came upon him unexpectedly, and in her fright and haste to get away, ran across the Lion's nose. Roused from his nap, the Lion laid his huge paw angrily on the tiny creature to kill her.
"Spare me!" begged the poor Mouse. "Please let me go and some day I will surely repay you."
The Lion was much amused to think that a Mouse could ever help him. But he was generous and finally let the Mouse go.
Some days later, while stalking his prey in the forest, the Lion was caught in the toils of a hunter's net. Unable to free himself, he filled the forest with his angry roaring. The Mouse knew the voice and quickly found the Lion struggling in the net. Running to one of the great ropes that bound him, she gnawed it until it parted, and soon the Lion was free.

"You laughed when I said I would repay you," said the Mouse. "Now you see that even a Mouse can help a Lion." The fable ends with this truth: A kindness is never wasted.

- A kindness surely is NEVER wasted. Even if you get an angry response, you still have the satisfaction of knowing you did the right thing. One of the ugliest parts of the prevailing church culture, and what has given the wonderful mission and intentions of Evangelicalism a bad reputation is a marked lack of mercy. Now, mind you, we get, almost exclusively, the news reports and Facebook testimonials that make us look the worst. Church signs are an especially problematic – they can be inane and they can be funny. Unfortunately, sometimes they can off-putting at best and hateful at worst. Yesterday one of my Facebook friends posted the text of a church sign they saw on the way to the beach. She wrote, “Subtle message spotted on a church marquee . . . : It said ‘Stop, drop, and roll does not work in hell.’ (So peaceful and inviting)”. This is funny as an inside joke for Christians. It’s a sad truth too so, if we hear it, we should laugh sadly and get to work keeping people from going to hell. But for a non-Christian, especially one like the person who posted this, who is looking for things to be wrong with Christians, it’s just confirmation of their idea that Christians are hateful and certainly not peaceful.
- This is what Jesus is saying, regardless of the outcome, err on the side of mercy and we will see mercy, even if it’s only the mercy of God.

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

- In Acts 6, one of the recently selected deacons named Stephen was arrested for preaching about Jesus. When he was brought before the Sanhedrin which was the Jewish ruling council to explain himself, it says, *All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.* Acts 6:15. Stephen had been with God and as a result he was pure in heart. As a result, others could see it in him.
- Here is the promise, the more time you spend with Jesus and the more time you spend in his word, you will see him. The pure in heart will see God long before they actually see glory. Peterson says it like this, *You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.* Matthew 5:8 (The Message).

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

- Once again, Peterson says it best, *You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.* Matthew 5:9 (The Message).
- I mean really, what gets done with fighting? What good gets done with violent talk and threats. The Bible says *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.* Proverbs 15:1. Once again, thinking back to what we saw about meekness a bit ago – a gentle answer is not wimpy – it’s actually the strongest response.
- There is amazing power in the peaceful response. I think back to when Judas led the soldiers to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, it says, *Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.* John 18:4-6. Jesus uses no violence, yet just the power of his name caused the soldiers to fall. Later when Peter sliced the ear off of one of the men there to arrest Jesus, he told Peter to put his sword away and healed the man. Peacemakers are children of God. Jesus said that. He meant it. He lived it. He expects us to live it – even if it’s counter-cultural. And finally...

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- Once again, Peterson says it best here, *You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.* Matthew 5:10 (The Message). The peaceful response will bring persecution from even those who are supposed to be our friends. Righteousness makes people mad. But just look at the inheritance. It’s worth it. Just being in God’s will is worth it.
- Let me say, don’t invite trouble. I mean, we have enough of that without making it up. But commitment to counter-culture drives people crazy – it may bring on trouble. Good! You’re doing something right.

Conclusion: Let’s live this ABC. Let’s surprise people with the love of Jesus. Let’s bless as we have been blessed.

Gabe Lyons in his book NEXT CHRISTIANS describes how churches in Portland, Oregon came up with a plan called Season of Service which, to name a few things, helped in schools and with homeless shelters and with clean-up around the city. They went to mayor of Portland who was the first openly gay mayor of a top-30 U.S. city and offered their proposal. He was naturally wary. He probably had not had good experiences with church people. But the program was a huge success and the mayor, his name was Sam Adams, had high praise for the program as it went into succeeding years. The media took notice. They said it was “stereotype busting”. In other words, they had a picture of church people judging and instead they saw church people helping and making a difference.

We may have a chance to do this. Andrew has come up with the awesome idea for Ashland are churches to do a kind of season of service of our own here in 2020 or 2021 through Group Cares. Stay tuned – ABC can take the lead.

This past week I heard that a local school had gone to a nearby pastor and asked for help with a growing problem their Jr. High students are having with pornography and other perversions. My friend who is pastor at that church is beginning a program to deal with the problem. That school superintendent and that pastor are my heroes. The partnership between the school and the church is a courageous counter-cultural move.

You see this is what happens when you do as Peter instructs us to *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.* 1 Peter 2:12. Let’s be that kind of infinitely relevant counter-culture. Amen.