August 25/26, 2012

# Culture Wars – Part 2

*Time, Talent, Treasure Series*

**Matthew 5:6-16**

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We've been reminding ourselves of the importance of stewarding—of managing—our time, our talents, our treasures, into the things that ultimately matter. It's probably good to remind ourselves that what we're talking about has really nothing to do with whether you're rich or poor, whether you make a lot of money or a little bit of money, whether you have lots of stuff or just a little bit of stuff. I've often said, "If I was a businessman, I would seek to run that business with excellence," which would include a significant profit. There's nothing wrong with that. God has no problems with that. The issue is the issue of the heart. Where do I find my significance? Where do I find my value? At the end of the day, what am I really living for? And that has nothing to do with rich or poor. It has to do with the orientation of my heart. Now, one might ask the question, "Why do we talk about this so often?" I think we could make a very strong case that it's much more difficult to invest our lives in the things that matter today in America than it was fifty years ago and a hundred years ago because fundamentally something has changed at the core of who we are as a nation.

Now I'm not a sociologist but I'm going to give you my best shot at a grossly over-simplified view of what has changed. If you think, as a result of this emphasis and thinking about these things, you just need to tweak your life a little, that to me is like a fad diet. It will last about two weeks and then back to the same old patterns. We're not talking about a little tweak. We're talking about a fundamental change at the core of your thinking. This country was founded on Christian principles. By all means, all of the founding fathers were not Christians, but they did have a high view of God and they had a high respect for the Word of God. All you have to do is go back and read the founding documents. That's abundantly clear. And that created a sense of *us*—who we are together as a nation—and a desire to create something different, something unique.

Most culture-watchers would say that something dramatically changed about the 1960's. Every person in every nation throughout history has always struggled with this idea of whether I'm going to be my own god or whether I'm going to submit to God, but right around the '60's we began to declare—officially as a nation—we were making the change. We began to pull God out of the schools, God out of the government, God out of public conversations, God out of the business arena, and we began to travel down a very different path and that would be the pathway of *secularism*. I would suggest to you today we are a long ways down that path. As a matter-of-fact, I would say we have declared secularism as our national religion. This idea that schools, the workplace, government can be neutral is a ridiculous idea. There is no such thing as neutrality. What we've said is we require people in those arenas now to be secular in their orientation and we have embraced that as a nation. The fruit of that can be seen in many ways. It can be seen in this new atheism that says, "God is out; now there is no god."

We can see it in *pluralism*, which is the belief that all roads lead to God, because if God is out and I'm in charge, I say all roads lead to God. We see it in *relativism*, which is the understanding that there are no moral absolutes because there is no God. One of the perks of being your own god is you decide for yourself what's right and wrong. So relativism flows out of secularism. But the fruit of secularism is also the arrogance; it's the greed; it's the dishonesty; it's the anger; it's the hostility;

it's the despair; it's the hopelessness; it's the violence. This is all fruit of a decision we made decades ago.

At the very core of secularism is the belief I can be my own god—I'm now in charge—and that is how I will find meaning and purpose in life. At the core of that belief system is an ultimate dedication to *self*. The core of this performance-driven, me-as-god value systems means: "I am ultimately in charge, so every single day is oriented around *me*. It's about what I want." There's no longer a sense of community. We're not in this together. It's about me! At the end of the day it's about what I want; it's about what I need; it's about living my life my way. As long as I buy into that operating system—which is the default mode in our country—I stand zero chance of ever living for what ultimately matters. I must make a very deliberate choice to live *other than* the current of the culture to avoid wasting my life.

With that in mind, I invite you to turn with us to Matthew, Chapter 5. We're looking at what's referred to as *The Sermon on the Mount*. The very last thing Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount —in preaching terms we'd call it the conclusion—Jesus said, "*Whoever listens to Me and lives the way I say, builds his house upon the rock—in other words lives for the things that ultimately matter, the things that will last. But whoever listens to Me, but then doesn't live that way, is going to spend a lifetime building nothing more than sand castles."* So it raised the question, when Jesus says, "*Whoever listens to Me*..." what did He say? Well, that would be everything contained in the Sermon on the Mount. So last week we picked it up in the section that's referred to as *The Beatitudes*. We got part way through, and we'll finish it this morning. You might think of these as the *attitudes* that reflect the kingdom culture. The culture that Jesus invites us into is dramatically different than the culture that we live in, in America. It's a competing culture.

The first one was, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit*." This is what I would call the great divide. If you don't get this one right, you stand no chance of getting the others right. *Poor in spirit* means broken; it means humble. It means a recognition I can't be my own god; I can't be my own savior; I need help and, in brokenness and humility, we surrender ourselves to God. This is the moving of self off the throne. I'm not God; God is God, and I choose to submit and surrender my life to God. He now becomes my source of significance, my source of value, my source of purpose. The orientation of my life is around God, what You have called me to be and do in this world. I have become His bond-slave, which leads to, then, *those who mourn*—mourn over my own sin, what my sin has done to my own life, what my sin has done to the people around me, but I also mourn for what sin has done to this world and done to the people around me. And rather than having a heart of self-righteous judgment, I have a heart of compassion and I want people to know the Jesus that has so radically changed me. This leads to a heart that is *gentle*—strength brought under control. Many people would look at this world full of power brokers and full of bullies and say, "If I become gentle, we'll never win. But Jesus surprises us when he says, "At the end of the day, the greatest upset in history will be: *the gentle inherit the earth*. It's referring to the *new heaven* and the *new earth.* At the end of the day, the bullies don't win. At the end of the day, the power brokers don't win. At the end of the day, **the gentle inherit the earth**. Verse 6:

> **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."** (*NASB, Matthew 5:6)

These are two very powerful drives: the drive for hunger, the drive for water. No matter how busy any of us are today, somehow, someway, we will make sure we have time to eat and we have time to drink. What if there was a passion within us that was equally strong, that no matter what we did

today, no matter what the demands were on us today, we would have this driving passion for **righteousness**? The best way to think of that is simply *to do the right thing*. Personal righteousness always manifests itself in the pursuit of greater righteousness—in other words a passion to do right. We look at the world, such as it is, and we say, "This isn't God's dream for the world; this isn't God's vision; this isn't what God wanted." There's so much around our world that bothers us and, rather than just simply walking past it every day, consumed with selfishness, we have this desire to do something about it—to change the world in my school, where I work, in my home, in my neighborhood. It would be a fair criticism of our movement as fundamentalists, that we were often more passionate about *being* right than we were about *doing* right. Frankly you can't really *be* right unless you *do* right.

He says, **"...they will be satisfied."** What He's referring to is *the new heaven and the new earth*. This passion within us that longs for a better place is not just some silly dream that will never be realized. The promise is one day it will be fully realized. That desire will be ultimately satisfied in ultimate redemption when God brings in the new heaven and the new earth. For now we give people a taste of it today, and there's something deep within us that causes us to live for something more than just selfish consumerism. You can begin to see how this kingdom value system changes everything, how I could really invest my life in the things that matter, if I am passionate about righteousness.

**"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."** (Vs. 7)

**Merciful**—meaning grace, meaning mercy, meaning forgiveness—that in the kingdom culture we would extend to others what we have received freely from God. He says, "**Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**" It doesn't mean that God's mercy is conditional. There's a very similar statement about God's forgiveness. What it does mean is, practically speaking, you will never really delight in the freedom of God's mercy, God's grace, God's forgiveness, unless you yourself become a person of mercy, become a person of forgiveness, become a person of grace. I would suggest to you that none of us really understand the depth of grace and mercy and forgiveness until you have been deeply, deeply wounded. Over the years I've known many Christians who have been exposed to the teaching of grace for years, but when they are deeply wounded, it becomes obvious they have no real theology of grace and they travel down a pathway of anger and bitterness. It's not until you, yourself, have had to feel the cost of grace and mercy and forgiveness that you really begin to understand the grace and the mercy and the forgiveness you've received from God. In all my years of ministry, I've never once seen a person who was unforgiving, who lacked grace, who lacked mercy toward others, but absolutely delighted in the grace and mercy of God. I've never seen that. It doesn't work that way. Show me a person that struggles to show grace and mercy and forgiveness to others, and I'll show you a person that cannot experience the freedom and the delight in the grace and mercy and forgiveness of God. It's a package deal—one comes with the other. Rather than choosing to be angry and to enter into this angry, toxic culture in which we live, we choose to be people of mercy, people of grace, people of forgiveness, and that is tested most when you are wounded most deeply.

**"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.** (Vs. 8)

**Pure in heart** means those that are absolutely sincere, utterly sincere both inside and out—no games, no politics, no maneuvering, no manipulation—just fully sincere inside and out. As long as you embrace the performance-based, self-oriented culture, there is no chance for this. Every day is

about performing; every day is about image; every day is about winning. As a self-oriented performer, I can't afford to show mercy; I can't afford to show grace. I have to win!

That's the nature of the system. As someone who has bought into this self-oriented system, I wear a mask every day because it's about looking good; it's about image; it's about fitting in. So I put on a mask—I go to work. I put on a mask—I go to school. I put on a mask—I hang out with my friends. I put on a mask—I go home. You know the question is, "Will the real Bryan Clark please stand up?" because we can't figure it out, because everywhere I go in life, I wear a mask. I have to. My significance, my image, my self-esteem—everything's a risk. I can't afford, for one minute of the day, to just be me. Those of you in the business community have often done business with people who pretend to be one thing and you find out there's something very different deep inside. That is what defines our culture. It happens all the time. But once I've rejected this selfish, self-oriented, performance-based culture and found my significance and my value and be rightly related to God, He has set me free to be who He's made me to be—utterly sincere, **pure in heart.** You know, if this is true, you can honestly say, "Who I am in public is exactly the same as who I am in the most private moments of my life when nobody's watching and nobody knows."

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.** (Vs. 9)

This Greek word, you might say, would be the equivalent of the Hebrew word *shalom*. It has the same idea of weaving back together the torn fabric of a community. It has the idea of mutual flourishing—that we create an environment where everyone can flourish and we're in this together. There's no way to view life that way if your orientation is selfish. But if you understand the kingdom culture, it's no longer about *me*. It's about *us* and it's about us experiencing God's goodness and grace, and we're in this together—that we might all flourish as God intended for it to be. Notice it doesn't just say, "*Blessed are the peaceful*." This isn't passive. It isn't enough for me just to be peaceful. I am called to be a **peacemaker**. I'm not just passive; I'm active in trying to be part of the solution at work, at school, at home, in your neighborhood. It's not enough to just not enter in, but to enter in and roll up our sleeves in such a way that, rather than contributing to the anger and the hatred that defines our culture today, we're part of the solution to seek to bring peace.

Over the years I've known Christians, where everywhere they go there's conflict, and somehow they convince themselves this is what God wants. There's conflict at home; there's conflict at work; there's conflict at school. There's conflict with their kids, conflict with your spouse, conflict in the neighborhood, and somehow it's because I take my stand, convince ourselves this is what God wants. This is not what God wants! We're called to be **peacemakers**. I mentioned last week it's entirely possible this could be the way that our light shines the brightest in this very angry, toxic culture in which we live. If we say to people, "I'm simply not going to fight. I'm not going to be part of the problem. I'm not going to contribute to the total destruction of a culture." It's very hard to fight people that won't fight back, but no matter what they do, we choose to respond as peacemakers. That is so contrary to contemporary culture, it would have to get people's attention. He says, "**Blessed are the peacemakers, for these are the sons of God—**these are the children of God." This is our identifying mark, as those who have changed cultures to a kingdom culture.

Now certainly you would think: If we reflected these attitudes at work, in our neighborhood, at home, in our schools, that people would love us. "*Oh my, you're wonderful! We love the kingdom culture people!"* Hmm, verse 10:

> **"Blessed are those who have been persecuted** [Why?] **for the sake of righteousness** [in other words, living out this culture], **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, because of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.** (Vs. 10-12)

Those are sobering words from Jesus. If you're going to stand for righteousness, if you're going to live out this kingdom culture, it's going to be a very bumpy ride. So just remember your reward is in heaven. You're building on the rock; you're living for what matters. But don't expect people in contemporary culture to say, "We love you." Why is that? Why do people have such strong emotional reactions to those who choose to live the kingdom culture?

Jesus said in the Gospel of John that people in this culture love the darkness. People in the darkness can pretend to be whatever they want to be. People in the culture would be offended at me saying they have chosen to become their own god and so they operate in darkness. They want to keep everything hidden. As long as I am in the darkness, I can wear my mask. I can pretend to be whatever I need to be and I can keep all my rats hidden. Nobody needs to know. In our current relativistic culture, if people are living lives of immorality, lives of sin, rather than dealing with their behavior, they simply change the rules. This is a perk of relativism. "I don't have to change my behavior; I just change the rules. Who said that's wrong? Who said that's immoral? Who says that's sin?" And they're very angry about those that say, "Hey, you really don't have the right to do that." We're judgmental; we're discriminatory; we're mean-spirited; we're hate mongers because we tell them, "You don't have the right to change the rules." Jesus said that when He came to this earth, He came as the light and the light shined into the darkness and the rats were exposed and people didn't like that. "Hey, I don't like that light exposing my rats." At that moment there are two choices: either you clean up your rats or you extinguish the light. And their choice was to extinguish the light. Jesus said, *"If you're going to follow Me, you're going to shine a light into a dark culture and it's going to expose people's rats and they won't like it and they're going to insult you and they're to persecute you and they're going to falsely accuse you."*

Have you ever wondered why people have such strong emotional, angry, hate-filled responses to Christian positions in a community? I mean, we can't even have a normal civil conversation. Two words and it's toxic; it's out of control. The reason is because those discussions aren't ultimately about that issue. They're about the core issue: whether or not you have the right to be your own god and remake the standard. And, at the core, if people believe that they are their own god and they have every right to be, they will fight with every ounce of emotion and energy they have to protect that right to be their own god. That's where the emotion's coming from; that's where the anger's coming from. Jesus says:

> **"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty *again*? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.** ( Vs. 13-16)

Very familiar words from *The Sermon on the Mount*. People often say, "We are the light; we are the salt," and I've heard preachers go off on all the explanations of what that means. But within the context in which it is given, He's specifically saying, "If you live out this kingdom culture—the eight Beatitudes that we've just discussed—that is the source of your light. That is what makes the salt salty. That is what distinguishes us from a selfish, performance-based culture." It would be wonderful if we could live out this value system and people would love us, but Jesus says, "Hey, this is going to be a rough road. This is going to be a little bit rocky because people don't like their rats exposed, so it's going to be bumpy." There's nothing we can do to change that. I think here's the question: "How do you respond when people treat you that way?" That's the moment of truth. That's when the world finds out if we're just like them or if there's really something different. The tendency is to fight back, and we can convince ourselves that's what God wants. I'm taking my stand; I'm taking my stand in the neighborhood; I'm taking my stand at work. But, at the end of the day, we're just like the rest of the culture. We're angry and we're just contributing to the breakdown of a community.

What if, in those moments, we said, "I'm not going to fight; give it your best shot; I'm not going to do that. I'm going to respond with grace and mercy, going to respond with compassion. I'm going to be a peacemaker. I'm going to march to a different drummer. We have thousands and thousands and thousands of people all over this city—pretty much anywhere you go. If we chose not to contribute to the anger and fighting, and chose rather to respond with grace and love and mercy, "No matter what you do to us, we're going to love you and we're going to be passionate about doing the right thing and we're going to change our community from the inside-out, because ultimately...**the gentle inherit the earth**." We could change this community. That would be our light; that would be our salt—that people would know the Jesus that has so radically changed us. Jesus said, "If you listen to My words and live this way; you build your house on the rock. If you choose to ignore me, then you'll spend a lifetime building sand castles."

Friday morning, we said our final farewell on this earth to one of the great saints at Berean. Vernon Smith was ninety-two years old—a beautiful, beautiful example of everything that we've been talking about, beautifully modeled to the finish line—what it means to live this kingdom culture. I had a professor in seminary that used to say, "Last words are lasting words." Saturday morning Vernon was surrounded by his family, and they sang, they prayed, they worshipped, and then Vernon uttered some of the last words of his life. He looked around and he simply said, "I am satisfied." Can you imagine? Ninety-two years old, looking back over a lifetime, ready to meet your Maker, and knowing, "*I have lived my life for the things that matter. I'm satisfied and I'm ready to go*."

The remarkable thing about that is, for all eternity, no matter what happens, that story can't be changed. It is forever locked into the records of eternity: *Vernon Smith lived for what matters*. Nobody can change that. Nobody can compromise that. Nobody can smear that. It's locked in and a hundred thousand years from now, it will still be true. That's how Vernon lived his life. There is no other investment like that. As I think about someone like Vernon, to be honest with you, I find myself very jealous. I would love to be on my death bed at ninety-two, having finished my journey, and be able to look back and say, "I am satisfied." I'm fifty-three years old. If I live to be as old as Vernon, I have a lot of time to mess up. I have a lot of time where I could still be really stupid. I have a lot of time where I could really get off the path and I don't want that. I want to be ninety-two and, on my death bed, look back and say, "I lived for the things that mattered. I am satisfied." May it be true of all of us.

*Our Father, we're thankful for men like Vernon, that modeled so beautifully the kingdom culture. Lord, in this room this morning, there are others who have modeled it just as beautifully. Lord, they teach us how to live. Lord, encourage them, guide them, strengthen them. Lord, our prayer would be that all of us would live in such a way that we would invest our time and our talent and our treasures in the things that ultimately matter. Lord, may it be so, in Jesus' Name.*

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