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STAR POWER  
Matthew 5:14-16

Have you ever been to traffic school? I confess I have been there. It is a confession since you only go there if you have done something wrong. You have broken the law. It occurred to me when I went that it is unfortunate that we in the church cannot work out something with traffic schools because there is a great evangelistic opportunity there. Imagine how effective it would be if at the end of traffic school you could address the attendees and say, "How did you enjoy this? Well imagine doing this for eternity, because if you don't know Jesus, something like that awaits you." Man, they'd come forward to receive Jesus in droves. Although someone might say, "Wasn't what we just did eternal? It felt like it." I remember sitting in that room in the afternoon and pitying the guy running the program, because it was obvious he didn't have anything to say and he was just filling the time. And he had 2 more hours to go. What made it interminable was that there was no real point to it. They weren't trying to actually accomplish anything. We just had to be there to fulfill a requirement. It also occurs to me that if church is like that, there's no real point to it, we're just fulfilling something we think God requires of us, it's going to be deadly. That means it is essential that we understand what we are trying to do as a body of believers. Today we mark the anniversary of the beginning of our church. It is appropriate to remind ourselves of who we are and what our vision is. In order to remind us of what we exist to be and to do, I want us to first think about our cultural context, for it has some implications for who we are.

There are some ideas deeply embedded in our culture that are behind much of what is going on today. I will point out 3 key ideas. The first cultural idea is that there is no revelation of absolute truth. Therefore truth, morality, right and wrong are all a matter of personal choice and perspective. In other words, truth is relative.

It amuses me that some people seem to think this is a very modern enlightened idea. It is actually a very old idea that was promulgated by an ancient Greek philosopher named Protagoras. His most well-known statement was, "man is the measure of all things." By this he meant that truth is relative, for what appears true to one person may not appear true to another. Just yesterday while we are on a walk we encountered one neighbor who said he was out early because it was already hot and he wanted to beat the heat as much as possible, since it was going to get much worse. At the end of our walk we ran into another neighbor who said

cheerfully, “Isn’t it a beautiful day?” One thought it was unpleasantly hot, the other thought it was perfect. Who was right? There is no right, there is only personal opinion. Protagoras claimed this was the nature of the question of truth. It is always relative, a matter of one’s perspective.

However, Plato debunked Protagoras’ theory by pointing out the obvious fallacy in the statement “all truth is relative.” It is a self-negating statement. It is itself an absolute statement about truth, thus if it is true, then it is not true. After Plato’s critique the idea fell out of favor for nearly two millennia until the so-called Age of Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In that period philosophers like Spinoza, Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant and others rejected the idea of any supernatural revelation of divine truth. Human reason became the determinant of what is true. As soon as that switch was made absolute truth became impossible, for human reason is not absolute. Suddenly you are back to man being the measure of all things. Friedrich Nietzsche said, “You have your way, I have my way. As for the right way, it does not exist.”

That idea is now the bedrock of our society. Since there is no one truth, we must all accept what others believe as equally valid. You have your truth and I have mine. Tolerance now becomes the ultimate virtue. Philosopher John Locke, writing in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, predicted that such an idea would lead to chaos. He said if there is no God and no divine law, in other words no absolute truth, the individual would “have no law but his own will, no end but himself. He would be a god to himself, and the satisfaction of his own will the sole measure and end of all his actions.”

That is where we are today in our culture. Each person has no law but his own will and no end but himself. The satisfaction of self is glorified in our society. The overwhelming majority of people we know believe to the core of their being that truth is relative. The idea of some objective absolute truth that exists outside themselves is utterly foreign to them. They cannot conceive of some moral authority over them that has the right and power to determine what is right and wrong. The one great sin is to tell a person that something he or she does or believes is wrong.

A second idea is rooted a little less obviously in our society but is now having consequences that are glaringly apparent. Most people probably cannot articulate this second idea, maybe are not even aware that they believe it, but it exists pervasively and it is behind much that is happening today. That idea is that sexual expression is the key to human identity and fulfillment. The implication is that freedom from any restraint of sexuality is essential to true health and wholeness.

Austrian psychologist William Reich has heavily influenced our culture. Picking up on some of Sigmund Freud's ideas he taught that all neuroses are the result of sexual inhibition or failure. The implication is that any sexual inhibition inevitably results in neurosis or mental health problems. He went further and made the astounding statement that sex is "man's only salvation, leading to the Kingdom of heaven." Margaret Sanger was the American proponent of many of the ideas behind our culture's views of sexuality. She is the patron saint of Planned Parenthood. She said that unrestrained sexual expression is the only way by which people can find inner peace, security and beauty. She asserted that if we could remove all sexual restraint "most of the larger evils of society will perish."

Have you ever wondered why there has been such a push to have women have no fear of having a child from their sexual encounters? Why the nearly irrational and militant defense of the horror of abortion? It is because if a woman fears having sex might lead to unwanted pregnancy, she will be sexually inhibited. According to Reich this inhibition damages her. It will produce neuroses. Such inhibitions deny her mental health. The only way that a woman can be truly happy and whole is by having total sexual freedom without fear of consequence. Have you wondered why homosexuality and the transgender agenda seem to trump (please excuse the word) everything else in our society today? It is because gays and transgenders must be allowed to express their sexuality or they are denied salvation! They are denied the ability to be mentally healthy. Our society has bought the idea that their sexuality is their identity, as it is for all of us.

According to this view if you try to restrain a person's sexuality in any way, say by asserting God insists sex should be confined to a husband and wife, not only do you destroy his or her mental health, you deny that person the ability to experience peace and fulfillment, you keep them from their true identity, and you condemn society to a host of social evils. Hence, the great need for everyone is the rampant obsession with sex we see in our culture. Pornography, for instance, is not tawdry and damaging, it is normal and healthy, and merely one more possible element in finding peace, fulfillment and ridding society of ills! Most people we know would not articulate that perspective and might even squirm a little at being identified with it, but as a whole our society has bought into its implications.

A third idea that is less obvious in the average person but that is overt in education, government and especially in the media, is that God must be removed completely from the public square. This is not one that is presently embedded in most people, for the majority of Americans believe there is a God. However, you have likely noticed the total lack of mention of God in television shows and movies as well as

the discomfort most media people display when some athlete mentions God? You have probably wondered why even Christmas shows and movies seem to studiously avoid any hint of the mention of God. You are no doubt also aware that God is absolutely not allowed in our schools. This is because there is a committed effort to remove God from view.

There is a reason for this resistance to God. God represents authority. He is the unassailable evidence that the whole relativist system is a lie. His presence means there is truth and it is absolute. And his presence means that sexuality is not the answer to peace, nor is it to be unrestrained.

There is a second reality about our culture that is essential for us as a church to keep firmly in mind. That idea is that these philosophical tenets that are behind all that is happening in our culture are “givens.” When I was in high school, like you, I took geometry. That was the first time I was introduced to doing mathematical proofs. I recall that at that age it was totally mystifying to me. Logic escaped me. I would look at some theorem I was supposed to prove and have no idea about how to proceed. Plus, I couldn’t help but ask why I should even care if one triangle was congruent to another triangle. Why should I go to the trouble of proving it to be so? I eventually learned, and one thing I learned was that you always started your proof with the givens, axioms that are assumed to be true. You didn’t have to prove them, you just knew them. They were the starting point.

In our society today the ideas that I have pointed out are givens. No one has proven any of them, they are simply assumed to be true. They are the presuppositions of our society. They are the building blocks that everyone “knows” are true. They are self evident. People don’t question them any more than a fish would question the water that it swims in. It is simply a reality that is there. It is where you start without questioning.

This presents those of us who are believers in Jesus with a couple of problems. The first has to do with how we will be seen by others in our nation. Any belief in absolute truth, any claim to know right and wrong, any sexual constraint, is seen as at best an outmoded, dying vestige of ancient, discredited superstition. At worst, a Christian will be seen not merely as a backward, gullible, unintelligent superstitious person, but as a threat. What we believe is seen as evil, for it limits human fulfillment. We might keep others from experiencing true identity, fulfillment and peace by our moral restrictions. In other words we are doing damage to other people.

The second problem we have is that it is hard to argue with someone's ideas when they see them as givens. They have started with the premise that these ideas are true. They seem as obvious to them as the fact that the sun rises in the east. They cannot imagine a world without these givens. It is, to them, natural and obvious to think these things. This makes them very difficult to argue with because they are statements of faith, not fact. These ideas are considered unassailable and sacrosanct. No amount of argumentation is going to disprove these ideas, because they were never proven in the first place. If we cannot show people with evidence that they are wrong, how will we ever break them free?

### WE HAVE GREAT HOPE

#### THE SPIRIT OF GOD IS GREATER THAN THE SPIRIT OF THIS AGE

Yes, these ideas are deeply entrenched in our culture. But they are not stronger than God. 1 John 4:4 says, "You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is he who is in you than he that is in the world." Do you ever feel small and powerless? Do you ever feel like there are forces at work in our society that we puny Christians have no hope against? I feel like that sometimes. I stand here on Sundays in our little church and am supposed to talk about how we're going to impact the world. The people who scoff at us are so many and so powerful. Some of them are absurdly smart, way smarter than me.

They are not smarter, richer nor more powerful than God. Do you realize the forces that are arrayed against us have been fighting against God for thousands of years? They are not winning. They thought they defeated God's great plan in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, only to learn to their dismay that they had been played. God had tricked them into enabling him to win his greatest victory ever.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:4, "the god of unbelievers has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel." That is clear. I cannot open blinded eyes, but God can. Ephesians 2:1 says we were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were spiritually dead. It took the Spirit of God to breathe life into us. Ephesians 2:5 says he "made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions."

Any time a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ and enters God's eternal kingdom it is a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. It required bringing a spiritually dead person to life. The Holy Spirit can accomplish that in people no matter how dead they might seem to be. Are there degrees of dead? No, it is a binary thing, dead or not dead. There is no mostly dead. So the fact that you and I have been brought to life by the Spirit of God is proof that he can do that for anyone.

No, you will not be able to argue many people in our culture today out of what they believe, but that does not mean the Holy Spirit cannot work miraculously and powerfully. We don't need to feel powerless or hopeless, for in the end the forces arrayed against us oppose God and he will defeat them.

## THE WORLD SYSTEM IS DEATH

The system of the world that seems so very powerful and controls the minds and hearts of so many people is all a terrible lie. It will not produce life. It will produce the exact opposite. It will ruin people. The result of where our world is going inevitably will be frustrated longings and wounded souls that are more thirsty than ever for life and peace.

Brilliant sociologist Philip Rieff said that at the heart of our culture's beliefs is an attack on the traditional heterosexual family. The family is what provides us with a sense of security, with love, significance and especially identity. If you destroy the family what is going to happen? You rob people of security, identity, love and significance. They will look for those things in other places, but they will never find them. Our culture's system is ruining people.

Right now researchers are noticing some concerning trends. There is a marked increase in our society, especially among young people, in narcissism and in the obsession with celebrity and fame. What is that about? It is about a lack of security and a desperate longing for significance. That is not surprising. That is just what we should expect.

I am going to date myself by referring to an ancient movie that not very many people saw. It was called *Force 10 From Navarone*. It was a World War 2 movie made from the Alistair MacLean novel of the same name. In it a small team of allied soldiers is sent behind enemy lines to blow up a dam in order to stop a Nazi advance. After much difficulty they manage to plant the explosives, clear the area, and then set them off. They heard the explosions deep inside the dam, but then nothing happened. The team members were upset, crying, "It didn't work!" The explosives expert calmly said, "give it time." Sure enough after a delay cracks start showing in the dam, and in short order the whole thing collapses.

Think of that scene when you consider our society. Our enemy has planted bombs in our culture and he is setting them off. They will do damage. His intent is to ruin lives, and if they fall for his lies they will experience the damage he intends. People will not find what they are looking for in the world's system. They are

going to experience not peace and fulfillment but great harm. Eventually this will cause at least some to realize they need help. They will be looking for something that is real that can bring the peace and fulfillment they cannot find.

### THE BODY OF CHRIST CAN BE POWERFUL

This brings us to the matter of the church. Yuval Levin is an academic, a political analyst, and the founding editor of *National Affairs* magazine. He has written a book titled, *The Fractured Republic*. In it he reminds us that in a context where our **arguments** likely won't convince people who are steeped in their pre-suppositions, our **community** can make an enormous difference. In other words, when people are either unwilling or unable to *hear* that they are missing the boat they need to *see* something different. They need to see what they are looking for actually existing. They need to see a different way of living, a place where there is love, acceptance, hope, peace and joy being lived out together. In this case a picture may be worth 100,000 words.

Levin wrote that we need to make a positive case, not a negative one, by showing people what could be, giving them an example. Levin says that communities such as ours can be “a shelter and a model, a refuge and an act of edifying rebellion.” The moral aspect of our alternative community will have a power all its own. He goes on to suggest that our community, our church, can stand as a “living answer to the unrequited longings and...the destructive disorder” of our society.

This is not new. It has always been the church's calling. In Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let you light show before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

From the very beginning we were called by God to let our light shine. We were to be the city built on a hill that can be easily seen in the darkness. Years ago while I was in grad school I worked part time as a college pastor at a big church in Fullerton. We had a weekend winter retreat at a camp on Catalina Island. We took 150 students on the boat that leaves from Long Beach and goes to Catalina. That trip turned out to be 2 of the longest hours of my life. That day a winter storm had rolled in. We left just after dusk. There were a couple of people who got sick before we even got out of the harbor. There was a big storm swell running as well as storm tossed seas. The wind was howling, rain was pelting down, it was cold, it was dark and that boat was pitching and corkscrewing through the quartering seas

like an angry bronco. There were people getting unhappily reacquainted with their lunch everywhere on that boat. Inside the cabin the smell became so nauseating it alone could have invoked an eruption from one's stomach. I and a couple of friends tried to escape the sights, sounds and smells of misery by going out on the deck, trying to shelter behind the superstructure the best we could from the wind and rain. It was brutally cold, wet, and dark. Through lights on the deck we could see the slanting rain, and in the glow of the boats lights we could see the angry seas right next to the boat, but out beyond a few feet there was nothing but darkness. It was totally black out on the ocean. It was downright miserable, shivering in the dark and wet, trying to keep the seasickness from overwhelming me, just wanting it to be over. I cannot tell you what a relief it was to see the lights of the harbor on Catalina in the distance. That was our hope. When we caught sight of that light it promised a relief from all the cold, wet misery. We hung onto those lights and prayed that we would arrive at them quickly.

Jesus said we are to be that light in this dark, storm tossed world. In Philippians 2:15 encourages us to be "blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky." That is a picture much like the one Jesus used. Lights in the dark sky.

Jesus intended the church to be that city on a hill, a place where people could see something different than they experience anywhere else in the world. I had 2 friends in my college years and right after that expressed what this was about. One was totally resistant to the message of the gospel, but he kept finding himself drawn to the people at our college who believed it. He finally put his faith in Jesus. He told me that what he saw in Christians was real. He saw it nowhere else in the world, and he knew it was something he wanted.

My other friend had been in the army and served in Vietnam. He said in the terror and stress of combat he experienced an incredible deep bond with his brothers in arms. They loved each other and would sacrifice anything for each other. Then he left the army and no longer had that bond. He said he knew he longed for it again, but couldn't find it anywhere in the world. Then he got to know a group of Jesus followers and he saw that same thing. He knew he was created for that kind of love and oneness. It was that bond between people that drew him to Jesus. This is what Jesus was talking about. This is the community he has called us to be.

What will it require for us to be that model of edifying rebellion that Levin says is so needed and that Jesus has called us to be?



Each of us individually must experience life. Jesus talked quite a bit about his followers having life. He said in John 10:10 that he came to bring life to the fullest. In John 7:37-39 he said that those who believe in him would have rivers of living water flowing from within them. They would be so full of life they would not thirst for more but would have life that would overflow from them onto other people.

He did not mean that we would have trouble-free lives in which everything would go in our favor, but that in whatever happened in life we would be at peace, we would have joy, we would have hope and would not be daunted by circumstances. We would have lives full of meaning, even if our days are filled with seemingly mundane and trivial tasks. We would be at peace fundamentally because we are loved by God and are continually connected to him.

This is the life that everyone in the world is looking for. They won't find it through unrestrained sexuality. They won't find it by being famous or rich. Everyone knows who Tiger Woods is. Even now though it has been 3 years since he won a tournament and 8 years since he last won a major tournament, even though he is no longer on the list of the top 500 golfers in the world, people are still fascinated by him. He still attracts enormous attention. He is fabulously successful, absurdly wealthy. Yet in a recent article he told reporters, "There is really nothing I can look forward to...I am really good at playing video games. That's basically how I pass a lot of my time." In a story on Woods Kyle Porter, a CBS Sports golf writer said, "Woods' story is not that much different than yours or mine even if the parts surrounding it are glitzy and glamorous. His tale is one of the human condition. As it stands right now, it's a sad but true story of not being able to find what in the world he's looking for." Only God can provide it. But if we do not have this life we cannot be the light others need.

That life is available to us every moment of every day. It comes down to trusting in Jesus Christ and believing that what he supplies is enough. It is about living with him, rejoicing in what he has done for us, in our hope in him, and living for his glory. As we draw from his resources we can exhibit that life.

We must live and breathe the grace of God. I have been amazed by things I've heard from celebrity actors like Tom Hanks, Jennifer Lawrence, Anne Hathaway and others. They talk about the fear of failing, of the immense pressure of having the spotlight on them and having their potential flaws displayed for all the world to see. I tend to think, "What are you worried about? You've got so much money you could just quit today and live comfortably the rest of your life." But they don't

think that way. They keep striving for something even as they struggle with the need to perform.

All of us are in the same boat. Everyone knows they have to measure up. It is true at work, in school, in their recreation, in their friendships. All our lives we've had to measure up, to perform. We are in competition with others, constantly comparing ourselves to see how we're doing.

That is how the world works. It has worked that way since we were infants. Romans calls that the way of the flesh. Romans 8:6 says, "The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace." A mind governed by the Spirit is a mind that knows God's grace. It knows and is ruled by the principle that it is accepted and loved totally by God, despite not measuring up. It knows that measuring up is no longer a factor for it. It has faced the test, and God declared that it has passed with flying colors because of what Jesus has done and for no other reason.

That is life and peace, but it is also a powerful reminder that we didn't really measure up. We still don't. Which means as we look at others who aren't measuring up we see them with empathy, and we accept them as God has accepted us. This is to be the place where people can stop striving, stop trying to be good enough, where they can relax and be themselves, knowing they will be valued and loved. This means all the posturing, striving, competing can stop. It means there will be unity here. It means we don't need to be prejudiced against certain kinds of people. After what has happened in our nation in the past week we don't need to be told that our country is deeply and terribly divided. There is anger, division, conflict on all sides. People are weary of it. They long for people to live in peace. The church is the place where they must find it.

We must build strong marriages and families. At the heart of all of the chaos, hurt and dysfunction in our world are battered families. People are desperate to know that families can be whole. Several years ago Laurie and I were in a jewelry store because I was buying her a gift for our anniversary. The woman who was helping us in the store found out we were having an anniversary and asked which one. When we told her she seemed quite surprised. She couldn't believe we had been married that long, in part because she thought Laurie was much younger than she actually is. But she mentioned that we seemed so happy and so much in love with each other, that we were more like newlyweds than old veteran married people. She shook her head as though in disbelief and asked, "What is your secret? How have you done it?"

People want to know that husbands and wives can do more than just survive. They hope, they revel in the idea that two people can be rapturously, joyously in love for their entire lives. They want happily ever after. They want to know that kids can actually love their parents and not have to rebel against them, that families can be whole. The grace of God makes that possible for all of us. God wants it for us. He commands husbands and wives to love and serve each other. We must make the effort to pursue that. It starts with making it the priority over everything but following Jesus. But it will require obedience to him. It will require absolutely denying ourselves and living only to serve and bless our spouse, not ourselves. It will require that we live each moment in the power of God's love and grace, letting it control us so that we put more of a priority on loving each other than on serving self. Here's our secret: let the grace of God rule in your life and family, then serve your spouse without reservation. Let God supply your needs and you live to be a blessing to your spouse.

We must live for the kingdom of God. To be the people we need to be, to be the living example of a new kind of humanity, all of us are going to have to stop living for the kingdom of self and live for the kingdom of God. It will have to become more important than anything else that here, in the way we live, in the way we treat each other, in the way this group relates and operates, in the way we treat people in the world around us, people will get a taste of what it means to live in the kingdom of God.