

Things Above, Things Below

A Sermon Series Preached by
The Reverend Greg Rapier



August 4, 2019

Things Above

Matthew 5:13-16

Colossians 3:1-10

Craig Barnes, the President of Princeton Theological Seminary, tells a story about an airplane flight in a conversation gone horribly wrong. Dr. Barnes sits down on the airplane and the man sitting next to him is in a chatting sort of mood, so they get to talking. The man inevitably asks the question that all pastors seem to fear. He asks, “So what do you do?”

Dr. Barnes considers lying. He considers trying on some new professions for size. After squirming around for a bit, he says finally and reluctantly, “I’m a pastor.”

That’s when the conversation shifts. As soon as Barnes utters the word *pastor*, the man next to him begins, unprompted, to share his personal list of everything wrong with the Church, and his list is very, very exhaustive. He talks about the Christian Church’s history with slavery, and the Catholic Church covering up abuse. He says, “Christians act like they have this moral high ground to stand on, and the truth is they don’t. The Bible says care for the poor, but Christians seem to

only care about themselves. The Bible says love thy neighbor, but Christians can’t even get along with each other. They teach one thing, but in their lives they do the other.”

When the man finally finishes his list, his rant, Dr. Barnes leans in real close. He exhales, shakes his head, and then finally he says, “I have been on the inside of the Church over 25 years, and let me tell you... you don’t even know the half of it. It is way worse than even you described! The Church has every pitfall of bureaucracy and business; people in their relationships are as broken in the Church as they are outside of it; it’s an echo chamber where gossip spreads like wildfire. The Church is so much worse than you know.”

After a while the man sitting next to him says, “So why do you stay? Why do you serve in the Church if it’s that bad?”

Barnes sat there thinking that maybe he should have thought through his first answer a little better, thinking maybe these last 25 years were a mistake. He sits there in silence, and finally he says – and I’m paraphrasing – he says, “I guess it’s a faithfulness that keeps me here. A faithfulness rooted in hope. Not hope in human perfection, but hope in God’s promise that one day everything will be as it should.”

That's a solid answer, right? That's a good answer. Unfortunately, most people with these criticisms of the Church – and let's be clear, these are just and fair criticisms – most people who are critics of the Church won't find themselves sitting next to the President of Princeton Theological Seminary on an airplane! Most critics will never hear that side of the story. Most critics of the Church, of Christians, only hear about and talk about the hypocrisy. And we can complain all we want. We can say it's not fair. We can say that it's not accurately capturing the Church, or *our* church, *our* theology, *our* particular brand of Christianity. We can say that those critics and criticisms don't leave nearly enough room for God or for grace, and that all may be true. Maybe it's not fair. But this is the reality we live in. This is the world we live in, a world where for many people, Christianity and hypocrisy are synonymous. We'd be lying to ourselves if we said these criticisms didn't exist. You've heard them.

Just this past week, I've heard them. This past Tuesday, I posted a comment on a popular website that's neither Christian or non-Christian. The site uses an upvote-downvote system to rate your comment. The higher users rate your comment, the more visible it becomes. I don't mean to brag but my comment was very visible. The website is all-anonymous, but in it, I mentioned I was a pastor who works with youth. Because it was relevant, I laid out just a little bit of my philosophy for youth ministry: that being cool is not nearly the same as being relatable, and too often people try to be cool instead of being relatable. The comment itself was quite innocent. I received several responses, many of which were quite positive. Here are some of the others:

Does it feel good to start each day knowing your life mission is to use a book of lies to maintain control over others and generate a revenue stream for a highly toxic and cultish religion?

Let me guess: You hate gay people. You hate my brother.

Please stop being a pastor, or at least stop teaching Christianity. Maybe something less evil, outdated, and clearly racist, misogynistic, tribal, bronze-aged, and genocidal.

Why Christianity? Why such a hateful religion?

Why such a hateful religion? I hope this breaks your heart like it breaks mine. The God I know is not a God of hatred. Yet there's no denying that this is what many non-Christians associate with our faith: hatred. The priest/author Brennan Manning puts it this way: "The greatest single cause of Atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, and then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle." The world looks at the way religious organizations and individuals behave, and many just don't see a compelling reason to believe. They look at our lukewarm Christianity, at the way God affects (or doesn't affect) our lives, and they say, "Oh, so that's what Christianity is all about. No thanks, I'm good." And then they just go about their days as if nothing happened, like we all do sometimes after church.

Can you blame them? Outside of this hour on Sunday mornings, what is it that sets Christians apart? Or to make it more personal, what is it that sets you apart? What do your co-workers and your

friends, what do your children and your non-religious family members and your neighbors see in you that sets you apart?

In today's Scripture, the author we call Paul is addressing a Christian community that's lost its zest. The church Paul addresses is embedded in a community that's rich with diversity, a community with all sorts of different cultures and religions intermingling. It's not all that different than our contemporary context. The Christians have assimilated, which isn't in and of itself bad, but in the process, they've lost sight of who they are and of whose they are. They've stopped living the life God called them to live. Paul addresses their indifference, their lack of embodied Christianity. He says, "Look for the things that are above. Think about things above, and not things of the earth." Paul continues by telling us to put to death those vices that hold us back, to bury the things that distract us from Christ, so we can reorient ourselves back to the one who matters most. So we can regain that zest, that salt, that light. Paul's telling us *we can do better*.

Paul's message to the church in Colossae is hard to hear precisely because it's hard to do. Paul isn't asking us to do something easy. Paul isn't just asking us to *believe* the right thing, but rather he is asking us all to *do* the right thing, to take action, to reorient our lives away from everything else, and back toward Christ. It's a tall order, and one we all fall short of doing.

Now, I'm guessing you didn't come to church this morning to be told you're not good enough. I don't think you or I need to go to church to be told that. I kind of know that already. Many of us come to church not for bad news, but for good

news. And I promise you this is actually a message of good news, Paul's words to us today. Because as you recommit yourself to Christ, as you set your heart and your mind and your body on things above, as you give your full self over to Christ, you will discover yourself slowly changing. As you read Scripture, pray, study, and serve, you will find yourself becoming less irritable, more loving, gentle, forgiving, patient, and kind.

This sort of holistic change won't be easy – change never is. And it won't happen overnight – this is a life-long journey. But setting your mind on things above will, with faithful discipline, absolutely change you from the inside out, and that is very good news.

A couple years ago I purchased an Apple Watch from a friend. Today I only wear it sporadically because I have a complicated relationship with the thing. There's a lot about it I really like, and a lot I really don't. What I don't like is every notification, every text, every beep, hits my wrist and pulls me out of whatever moment I'm in. If I'm at work, or at dinner with my wife, or if I'm watching a movie, I'll feel a little twinge hit my wrist, and it'll distract me from what I was doing. I'd like to be more present than that.

But I do like some of its health features. It has a built-in pedometer, and so it keeps track of my steps. And when I'm exercising, it keeps track of my heart rate as well as my calories burned. It's a useful tool.

It also has a feature that at first I found kind of annoying. If you've been idle for too long, it'll *ding*, sort of like the high note on a piano. Then it'll tell you it's

time to stand. The idea being that you should be standing for at least one minute every waking hour of the day. It's basically Apple waving its finger at you and saying *you can do better*. So when I'm at my desk, or when I'm on the couch, even this modest goal of one minute an hour can, quite frankly, become really annoying.

Or, it can be life-changing.

Standing regularly reduces risk of weight gain, heart disease, diabetes, back pain, and cancer. It increases your energy level, improves your mood, and increases overall productivity. That little ding of the watch can reorient you away from a place of stagnancy and toward a healthier lifestyle. That simple twitch of the wrist can be the spark that ignites larger wholesale change from within. Over time, it can literally save your life.

When you hear Scripture telling you to set your mind on things above, do you clench up and picture Paul waving his finger at you? Do you picture God shaming you and telling you, *you should be better*?

Or, do you picture an opportunity for wholesale, life-defining transformation? Do you get excited about becoming spiritually healthier? Do you get excited about regaining some of that zest, that salt, about letting your light shine? Because at the end of the day that's all this text is. In the grand scheme of Scripture, today's text is nothing more than the *ding* of a watch. It's a reminder stand up and remember God.

This sermon too is nothing more than the *ding* of a watch. Given enough time, it will fade into the recesses of our memory

like the majority of the sermons we listen to. It's just your regular reminder to stand up for God. So stand up.

Challenge yourself to do a little better: Read Scripture, love recklessly, treat one another with dignity, even to people who don't respond in kind. Practice generosity. Offer forgiveness. Be a little more patient, a little more understanding. Complain less. Laugh more. Pray more. And just let God work.

Because I'll tell you what will happen. As you let God work, as you become a vessel of God's love, as you let God transform you on the inside, you will notice changes on the outside too and others will notice those changes as well. The most effective form of evangelism isn't walking door-to-door; it's a Christian life fully and authentically lived. Your daughter who wandered away from the faith, your brother who's never cared about the church, the person sitting next to you on the plane who sees nothing but hypocrisy, the strangers on an internet message board who see nothing but hatred, your neighbors and co-workers who are indifferent to it all – those people will begin to notice a difference within you. They'll begin to hear that *ding* for themselves. Then it's up to them to stand.

But you must stand first. You must stand proud. You must stand for things above, for God. Go on and stand. Amen.

August 11, 2019

Things Below

Matthew 5:21-26

Isaiah 1:11-17

Jewish temples back in the Old Testament were messy, bloody places and it's all because of covenants. Covenants are and were serious matters, and covenants weren't *made* – they were *cut*. The term in our bibles “to make a covenant” isn't quite accurate because in Hebrew, the word “ka-rath” doesn't mean *make*; it means *cut*.

Abraham and the Israelites didn't make covenants with God; they cut covenants with God, as in they literally took an animal and cut it in half as part of the ratification process for their covenants. The idea being that if either one of us goes back on our part of the deal, this may happen to us.

When an Israelite sinned against someone else or against God, in order to make things right, he or she would have to find a sacrificial lamb or goat and slaughter it. Sometimes they would slit the animal's throat, sometimes the animal would be burnt, so the Israelites – the sinners, the wrongful party – could live and continue in their covenant life with God.

The book of Leviticus describes God as sniffing the aroma of these burnt sacrifices, and the smell is described as pleasing to God. Not so much because God likes the smell of suffering animals, but because for a brief moment, all has been set right between good and evil and a balance has been restored.

There's a lot of blood, It's not pretty, and that's kind of the point. It's jarring, it's violent, it's ugly, it's tragic, but it's better than the alternative. Because if you or I broke our covenants with God, someone would have to pay. Better a sheep than a person.

This is all-important background for understanding today's Scripture. Listen again with fresh ears to what God has to say here in the opening chapter of Isaiah:

What should I think about your sacrifices? says the Lord. I'm fed up with entirely burnt offerings. I don't want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats... Stop bringing worthless offerings. Your incense repulses me... Your hands are stained with blood.

In this first chapter of Isaiah, God speaks against these holy, sacred animal sacrifices and burnt offerings that were considered a normal part of religious life. These practices were ingrained into the fabric of religious culture, and God's looking at these rituals with disdain. To give you an idea of just how surprising this is, this would be the equivalent of God saying to us today, “I am tired of your prayers. They hurt my ears. You pray far too much. Just knock it off already!”

Of course, God, in typical God fashion, is getting at something bigger. God isn't just dismissing the way that we worship God. God has a point. In today's Scripture, God is complaining about empty gestures of devotion.

God's telling us, “You sin against one another and then you offer me these sacrifices, these empty gestures of devotion to appease me, and I'm tired of

it! What's the point in offering these animal sacrifices, if as soon as you leave the temple, you're going to go right back to living the way you always have?"

Now I suspect very few of us participate in ritual animal sacrifice. Just a guess, I could be wrong. I suspect many of us don't regularly slaughter animals hoping that they smell good to God. But I think there's a lot more of the ancient Israelites in us than we would like to admit. Because if we're honest with ourselves, that tendency is still there. That tendency when we see something wrong or when we do something wrong to bypass the problem altogether and go straight to God. So when we sin, we pray for forgiveness. When we see brokenness in this world, we pray that it gets better. And, sometimes, we question *Why God? Why God don't you fix it?* All the while, we are doing nothing with our hands and our feet to fix it. Do you see the problem?

The Israelites' response to sin has always been to go and make things right with God. If I sin on the earth, I look above, I look to God, and I ask for forgiveness. That's what we all do, right? That's what we were raised to do as good and faithful Christians. There's nothing wrong with that. In today's Scripture, God is saying if you sin against a neighbor or a spouse or a friend or a brother, don't just apologize to God; apologize to them. When you see injustice in the world, don't just pray to God about it, but go out there and do something about it.

It's been said there are three dimensions in spirituality – upward, inward, and outward. The upward dimension is defined by God; the inward dimension is the self; and the outward is the world. These dimensions are defined

by relationships. You have a relationship with yourself (self-value, self-image, self-help books, etc.). You have a relationship with God (an active prayer life, reading Scripture, attending worship). And, you have a relationship with others, with the community around you, with the world that you interact with on a day-to-day basis.

God's saying that if you experience a fracture in the relationship between the self and the community, and your gut reaction is to jump up high to your relationship with God, you are missing out on something. Don't neglect the community. The community matters.

This isn't some weird Old Testament quirk either. In the Scripture read for us earlier, Jesus puts it this way:

If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister, then offer your gift.

Jesus wants us to embody our Christianity. He wants us to feel it in our bones. The God who later commissions us to go forth and make disciples of all nations, the God who tells us to heal the sick and the clothe the naked, the God who through the holy spirit continues to work today – *that God* wants us to live out our spirituality here on earth with one another.

We commonly think that this upward dimension is all that there is our religiosity. Religion is something private that we do. It's confined to the home and to the church – just me and Jesus. We don't really talk about it. We think about things below and things above and we

separate them. We separate things below from things above, the earthly from the heavenly, the sacred from the secular; we separate things of this world from things that matter. God is saying, “Hold on, this matters too.” You can’t separate things from this world from things that matter because God loves this world and it all matters.

God wants this whole world to thrive, and the only way that’s going to happen is if we take ownership of our problems. Because as we own our issues and the issues of this world, we permit ourselves to become agents of God’s goodness, which allows us to in turn transform the world.

So where you encounter brokenness, seek reconciliation. Where you sin, ask for forgiveness. It really is that simple.

That of course doesn’t make it easy. There may not be any blood involved, but seeking forgiveness either for yourself or for someone who wronged you can be just as messy as temple sacrifice. When complex family dynamics are involved, when years of bitterness and hatred need to be worked through, when you’re picking up the phone for the first time, when you’d rather be angry than offer forgiveness because what the person did was just that terrible, when you feel like you don’t deserve forgiveness yourself, when you’re arrested by fear, anxiety, jealousy, anger, uncertainty, and bitterness, the simple act of seeking forgiveness can feel like a monumental task.

Reconciliation in the world, well that’s even harder. Where problems like hunger, addiction, discrimination, gun violence, and poverty are so big, so complex and

layered, any action on your part feels unlikely to move the needle all that much.

This, friends, is not easy. Forgiveness isn’t easy because sin isn’t easy. Reconciliation isn’t easy because so much in our lives and in this world is fundamentally broken. Sometimes healing hurts.

In an exhibition game while preparing to represent Team USA in the FIBA 2014 Basketball World Cup, NBA player Paul George was contesting a shot. When he landed his leg buckled and broke completely in two, just below the shin. The injury was so gruesome that the rest of the game was canceled.

Immediately after the injury, many NBA players reached out to Paul George, both privately and publicly, offering their thoughts and prayers. They prayed for recovery. They prayed for Paul George’s family. They prayed for the doctors as Paul George underwent surgery. It was touching really, how in the midst of a devastating injury, the NBA community came together in Christian witness. Their prayers were vital, necessary, and important – their prayers mattered; your prayers matter – but their prayers would not have been enough without surgery or a miracle.

Shortly thereafter, Paul George underwent surgery to set the bone straight and repair his right leg. His career was in jeopardy, and he was expected to miss the entire next season at the very least. Even if he did return, conventional wisdom said he would never be the same, not after an injury like that.

However, Paul George wanted to play. He wanted to heal. He wanted to soar the

way he used to. So he underwent a grueling and extensive healing process complete with physical therapy and learning to re-trust his body and his leg all over again. Then of course, he had to get back into game shape after all those months off. However, he did it, and he returned before anyone else could have expected, playing the final six games that very same season.

Two years later, in 2016, he again represented Team USA, this time completely healthy. He won an Olympic Gold Medal. This year, Paul George, the player most believed would never be the same, had his best season to date, finishing third in the entire league in MVP voting.

The path to recovery was messy, rocky, and painful. However, because of everyone's prayers, yes, but also because of the physical healing process, because of the surgery and the physical therapy and the conditioning, because of the day-to-day choices he made, Paul George was able to heal himself and to overcome the brokenness in his body.

So too are we able to overcome the brokenness in our lives and in the world. By physically doing something about it; by seeking healing where we see brokenness; by taking small steps each day to slowly repair fractured relationships; by offering forgiveness where we've been hurt; by doing the hard and sometimes painful work of

reconciliation; by loving our enemies; by seeking forgiveness where we've sinned; by setting right broken systems; by advocating for those whose voices have been silenced; and, by committing ourselves to reconciliation both in our lives and in the lives of others, we can participate with God in slowly stitching back together a broken world. By embodying our faith and being vessels of God's goodness and forgiveness and grace, we can be agents of healing in this world.

Friends, God cares deeply about your relationship with God. God wants nothing more than for you to know and to love God, and for you to have an active prayer life. God cares about the upward dimension. God's love extends outward too. That same love extends towards your enemies, so God calls you to love them. God's love extends to the neglected, so God calls you to care for them. God's love extends to the lonely – to the orphan and the widow – so God calls you to be a friend. God's love extends inward to you, so God calls you to seek forgiveness. God's love extends to the far ends of the earth, so God asks you to care for it and to change it, one small act of healing at a time. Let it be so for you and also for me. Amen.

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