

The Lifestyle Problem

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, now as we turn to your word, we pray by your spirit you would plant fresh desires in our hearts. Show us the path of true freedom and help us to have that purity of heart that we need to see you.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. If you would open your Bibles to Matthew 5 on page 809 that Patty just read for us a moment ago.

That will be helpful. My name is David Short. This is Jeremy Graham. Someone said this morning, we look like we belong to a cult.

This is the basic black that clergy wear. And if you've got fashionable comments to make about it, give them to Jeremy. He's most interested because Jeremy loves this clobber.

And in fact, I'll tell you a secret, he sleeps in that shirt. This is just a cooler way of going. Now, we've been in a series looking at the problem of Christianity.

[1 : 09] You know, when people find out you're a Christian, they say, they usually say something like, the problem with Christianity is, and then they add something, which is either a really genuine problem for them, a great difficulty, or it can be a mantra or a slogan that they might have learned and they haven't really thought it through, and they help themselves and say it anyway.

Today, the problem with Christianity, today's message, is the lifestyle problem. And it goes something like this.

The problem with Christianity is that it's a straitjacket. You have to believe certain things and you have to do certain things and you have to not do certain things.

You Christians call certain behaviors that I like wrong and immoral and even sin, and that's an attack on my personal freedom. And that's not going to make me happy. You with me so far?

Just nod. Thank you. The Christian lifestyle, it's oppressive, controlling, restrictive, intolerant. You want to turn me into an unthinking machine.

[2 : 20] You infantilize me. You treat me like a child as though I don't have the right or I don't have the brains to be able to choose and do what's best for me. It's authoritarian. You violate my fundamental human rights and freedoms to believe what I want to believe and to do what I want to do, and that's not going to make me happy.

You with me so far? More noddings needed. I want to be free to find out who I am. I want to make my own way. I want to choose my own lifestyle.

I know what makes me happy. To become a Christian means to accept someone else's lifestyle. It's losing freedom. It's narrowing my options. It's confining me to what somebody else thinks.

Christianity is a straitjacket. Good response. It diminishes my personal.

I mean, you've heard this sort of thing, I'm sure. It's a danger to my dignity. It's a spiritual slavery. I am fundamentally fine. I could do with a holiday.

[3 : 26] I could do with some counseling. I could read some books on happiness. But to put my life in God's hands and to do what he says, to believe what he believes, is domineering, despotic, repressive, even exploitative.

It's not just that boundaries are boring and bad. They violate who I am. That's what people are saying. That's the lifestyle issue. In contrast to that, I want you to look at what Jesus says about the Christian lifestyle.

So I want to turn to Matthew chapter 5. This is the Sermon on the Mount. But in Jesus' view, the basic description of the Christian life is that it's blessed.

Not just free. Not just good. But blessed. I'm going to talk a bit about that in a minute. Jesus' view of the Christian life is it's not one foundationally about rules and regulations.

Eight times in those 12 sentences that Patty read, Jesus says, blessed are, blessed are, blessed are. We fundamentally stand under the blessing of God. Look at verse 4 for a moment.

[4 : 37] For example. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Really? The people who mourn are those who stop pretending to think that they know what's best for themselves.

The people that mourn have reflected on their lives and they've realized that by our personal choices, we've made a mess of ourselves, we've made a mess of our families, we've made a mess of our cities. And we've begun to take responsibility.

And we've begun to see that all these personal choices I'm making are hurting other people. And I'm not blaming anyone else for this. Least of all am I blaming God. And Jesus says, blessed are those who mourn in this way because we'll be truly comforted.

It's the comfort of grace and it's forgiveness and everlasting life. See how different that is? Or look at verse 6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

They will be satisfied. See, the Christian life, here is someone who is absolutely, he's focused not on his own rights and freedoms, but on righteousness. He's got a new appetite.

[5 : 47] There's this whole other thing that he's searching for. There's something about Jesus that is so compelling to this person that he hungers to be like Jesus and to do what God would have him do.

And that satisfaction, Jesus says, is going to be utterly satisfied because that desire for righteousness will join me to him and restore me to life and blessing.

And it's very interesting that a number of these beatitudes, the blessed sayings, are really about limitations, self-imposed limitations we put on ourselves.

Look at verse 7, for example. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. This is a choice to limit myself. If you're going to be merciful, you're not going to insist on your own way.

You're not going to move in for your own advantage when you can see someone's weak points and failings. This is almost impossible in an honor-based culture to believe blessed are the merciful.

[6 : 49] Or look at verse 9. Blessed are the peacemakers for they are to be called the sons of God. This is not just choosing to limit yourself and restrict yourself. This is positively facing difficulty, conflict, and for the sake of others.

It's a costly limitation. Blessed are you, says Jesus. You'll be showing what God is like. You'll be swallowing pain and swallowing your natural desire for advantage.

And this, like all the beatitudes, is a limitation of love. You just think about it for a moment. If you love somebody, you choose to limit yourself. You know, you give away your independence, your autonomy.

And what you gain is intimacy and joy. You choose to serve, which is very oppressive and inconvenient to your basic human rights.

So, why do so many people take a different view from Jesus? Why do so many people say that Christianity is a straitjacket? And I think we have to say it's understandable for three reasons.

[7 : 59] And I want to just talk about these three for a moment. It's understandable personally, number one, because if your experience of Christians generally has been joyless, rule-centered, self-righteous, not thoughtful, it's understandable to think that Christianity is like a straitjacket.

Douglas Coupland, who is a well-known Vancouver writer, explains why he's not a Christian in his book *Generation X*. Quote, Jesus came and Jesus said, Jesus came and Jesus said, I will give you the truth and the truth will set you free and you will be free indeed.

And we claim to follow Jesus, but I wonder if we're living out that freedom. Because there are some Christians, I think, who are more bound by rules and regulations, who are more defined by what they're not than by what they are, who don't have a sort of a warmth and a joy and encouragement. It's not the first thing you'd say about them. There's nobody present who fits this category. I'm just talking about other people for a moment, okay? However, I think it's understandable, just from a personal point of view, for some people to say that.

The second reason people think Christianity is a straitjacket is because of the culture we live in. And we live in a secular and pluralist age.

[9 : 37] And this question of lifestyle is a modern Western preoccupation. It's a wealthy privilege preoccupation. Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher and he writes that in traditional societies and in the West before modernity, the belief is in the givenness of the social order and the

givenness of the cosmic order.

And there was a pattern of life to follow if you wanted to find the good life. He says we are now in an axial age where all that has been changed radically.

With the rise of modern secularism, his word is we have been disembedded. We have been demored. We've been untethered from the transcendental understanding and we've become that dreaded thing, quote unquote, individuals.

You see, we used to be embedded in the natural order and in the social order. But if you remove God and transcendent belief, you're disembedded from that traditional narrative.

And therefore, you have to choose what you believe and you have to choose what has meaning for you. And what has replaced the cosmic order in modern secularism is the centrality and the sanctity of my personal choice.

[11:03] So I'm surrounded by different worldviews and different religions. How can I know what is true? How can I know if there is such a thing as truth? How can I know if there is such a thing as meaning? So in the absence of any transcendent meaning, meaning is up to me to create.

And the way I do that is by the power of my individual personal choice. So this thing is good simply because I choose it. Life is good simply because I've chosen it to be good.

What makes something good and free is simply my preference for that choice. This is the water we're swimming in. Amirislav Wolf, who's a theologian teaching at Yale, points out that if something is good simply because I say it's good, then it is weightless.

It is unstable. It is unsatisfying. If meaning is just what I say it is, tomorrow I might change my mind. And so everything is unstable.

This is the likeness of being that is unbearable. But I think it helps us understand why it's so offensive to the modern secular person to imagine that freedom comes from outside myself, from the blessing of God.

[12:16] That for freedom we need to rely on the revelation of God. Having something more weighty than my personal preferences. It's the reverse of the message we're swimming in today.

It also means accepting that the life I'm living, the way I'm living now, is not the best way. It's not the free life. And I need to learn to live again. So I think this idea that Christianity is a straitjacket comes from personal experience, but also from the culture we live in.

And thirdly, I think it's understandable spiritually. And it's understandable spiritually because of the great lie. Because the Bible is not just concerned with my freedom.

From the beginning of the Bible, God is concerned with something higher and better, and that is blessing. And blessing is the potential for life, good life.

And the Bible opens with God putting blessing within certain boundaries. The first chapter of the Bible in the creation narrative, God makes everything in six days.

[13:21] And in day one, two, and three, what God does is he separates things and puts limits on things and creates boundaries. He separates the light from the light. He separates the water from the land.

And then finally, the land from the firmament. And then day four, five, six, he comes back. Now that he's set the boundaries, now that he's separated these things, and he puts blessing in those things. He creates life in those things. Until finally, on day six, he creates man and woman. And he says, he blessed them, it says, and said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. And the Bible religion is very different from pagan religions. Because in pagan religions, the basic religious impulse is to smash the boundaries of creation and so release the power of the gods. And you do that by sex or you do that by sacrifice or some other means. What you want to do is try and return to the chaos outside the boundaries. And it's in this context, in Genesis 3, where the great lie is introduced.

[14:25] Two chapters later, there is a devastating shift with the introduction of the great lie. And the snake comes into the garden, the paradise. And the snake introduces the great lie.

And the great lie is God is not to be trusted and not to be loved for his own sake. God does not have your best at heart.

That's the great lie. And the snake comes to Eve and insinuates that the boundary God has set on the trees is confining, restricting, not well motivated.

Did God say? And then he goes for the one thing that God said no to. You see how restricting, instead of going for the generosity and grace of God, he goes for the one thing that God banned.

And he suggests, can't really trust God. God's word is not really for your best. God's deliberately holding something back for himself.

[15:20] There's an alternate way. There's a way to get blessing apart from in disobedience to God's word. And that is for you to make the decision and play God.

This is the great lie. And it goes directly to who God is. Is God worthy to be trusted? Does he mean what he says? Will we find truth and life and blessing inside what he says in his word or outside it? Is he good? Are we better? And as Eve interacts with the snake, then he openly lies. He just denies what God says.

You won't die. Don't believe that. Go ahead. You need to be the ones who decide what's good and evil for you. And the first man and the first woman believe the lie.

And they decide to replace God with their own decisions. And we have been doing that every day since. Every time we make a decision without thinking through what God would say.

[16:28] Every time we treat God as irrelevant. Every day that God gives us, we don't thank him and praise him. It just shows we believe the great lie.

It's so natural for us to believe this lie that we begin to call God a prison warden, not a liberator. We think that belonging to him is missing out.

And it's natural for us to think of God as a miserly killjoy, a sort of spiritual sourpuss who cares less for me than I care for myself. I think it's natural, spiritually natural, apart from Christ, to think of Christianity as a straitjacket.

And we're stuck. Nothing we can do can get us back into the garden. Nothing we can do can generate this blessing and life that God has created.

It has to come from God himself. And because we've exchanged the truth of God for the lie, we've replaced his blessing with a kind of a cursing.

[17:33] And we blame everyone except ourselves. And particularly we blame God himself. And even when God holds out his hands of love to us, we smack it away and we say, I just don't trust you. What have you ever done?

But what if that very thing that we imagine is a limitation and a restriction is actually the source of blessing? What if the straitjacket is the source of life and freedom?

Last week we saw that amazing rescue of the 12 boys and their teacher from a cave in Thailand. The wild boar soccer team.

Trapped for 18 days in the cave. It's a brilliant picture where the Bible says we are and what we need and what Jesus has done. They were irredeemably, irreversibly lost.

So deep in the cave it was impossible for them to get out and it didn't look good. And there they were without food, without light, for nine days, without any contact with the outside world, before the divers came and found them sheltering on this muddy ledge that was giving way.

[18:46] And for nine days the rescuers had been pumping out water and stockpiling oxygen tanks along the way, planning the rescue. And when the divers found them, they had to begin instructing these boys and the teacher in diving because they had to go underwater in the incredibly dangerous way out.

And the divers explained to each of the kids they needed to wear not one but two wetsuits because they were so cold. And then they had to wear a complete face mask, ensuring that they had oxygen throughout the rescue.

And then they had to be tethered to another diver and the diver was going to take responsibility to swim them out. And then they said, you have to trust us. Now just imagine one or two of the boys in the cave.

This is a preposterous thing to say. Just imagine that the boys say, just a minute. That sounds very controlling and restricting. This is way more, this is way too confining.

I don't want to wear even one wetsuit. And that face mask, if I put that face mask on, it's a denial of my basic dignity and right to choose. Besides, there's more of the cave to explore.

[19:59] How can I trust you? I'm used to making my own decisions. I got myself here, didn't I? So what do you do if you're one of those divers?

I shouldn't say this, but I'd probably produce a tranquilizer at that point. Well, you might tell the boys what it looks like outside. Remind them they have families and what the light is like and that they'll die there.

And that they ought to trust you. Thankfully, none of the boys in the cave did this. None of them pretended to know more than the divers.

None of them objected to the constraints of getting out. And the reason was that the very constraints, the very restrictions, were the thing that was going to lead them to new life and blessing.

And the reason for that is because of the authority of the divers. They knew what they were doing. Unknown to the boys, they'd risked their lives to reach them.

[21 : 07] And that's exactly what happens when Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount. Before the Sermon on the Mount and right at the end, the last verse of the Sermon on the Mount, everybody says, we're astonished at this man's authority.

Not just his authority to heal or to raise the dead or to still the storm, but his authority to speak these words from God himself. And the thing about his authority is it's different than any sort of authority the world had ever seen before.

Here comes the Son of God into the world, giving away his freedoms, giving away his rights, laying down his life for us. That's why as Christians, all the blessings of God come to us through Jesus Christ and by his authority.

It's the theme of Matthew's Gospel, which we'll get back to in the fall term. That Jesus has come from heaven with all the authority of God to save his people from their sins.

And tragically, as you know, one of the divers died in the rescue effort. And I think this is probably where the illustration breaks down. Because Jesus came into this world knowing that he would die.

[22 : 16] And that's the only way that he could save those. It's the only way he could save those who suspect him of having bad motives.

Or those who are hostile to the idea that they need rescuing. And Jesus comes and he opens the Sermon on the Mount and he says, Blessed are the poor in spirit. He says, theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Poor in spirit, he says. Those who recognize they don't have the spiritual resources to decide what true freedom is. And who've turned to Christ for that freedom.

And he says, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Not future, but present right now. To be poor in spirit means I recognize I've believed the lie.

I've lived on that lie. I have no spiritual resources. I am not God and you are God. And actually all my attempts at freedom apart from God have just created a tighter and more restrictive straitjacket.

[23 : 18] And that Christ Jesus and Christ Jesus alone is the way to life and freedom. Amen. The lovely thing is that when we do that, which we're going to celebrate again in the Lord's Supper today.

He doesn't give us a list of rules and do's and don'ts. He gives us himself. He doesn't just give us a new lifestyle. He gives us a new life. A life that belongs to the kingdom.

A life that's poor in spirit, but rich in hope and blessing and faith and goodness and above all grace. Amen. Amen. Amen.