

The Lifestyle Problem (Evening Service)

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- [0 : 0 0] Lord Jesus, when you speak, it doesn't sound like anything else we've ever heard. And our hearts turn back and forth between longing for the blessing you offer more than anything else in the world and resisting it.
- And so we ask for your Holy Spirit to turn our hearts to receive the good news that you have for us. The beautiful life that you have for us.
- And this we ask in your name. Amen. Good evening, everyone. Time to wake up. Ooh, it's pretty warm, I know.
- How are you doing? How many of you have seen the film *Babette's Feast*? *Babette's Feast*? If you haven't, I highly recommend it. It's a story of an austere, devout Christian village.
- And this village rejects all pleasures such as good food and good wine. And one day, a refugee named Babette comes from Paris.
- [1 : 1 6] And she arrives in this village as a servant. Well, Babette arranges to cook a real French dinner for the village using all the money that she has in the world. And in the process, the earthly pleasures of that amazing food and wine, it breaks down the villagers' distrust and superstition.
- And it elevates them both physically and spiritually. And offers the hope of a new lifestyle of love and forgiveness to the previously hopeless village folks.
- It's a beautiful film. But, when I watch it as a Christian, I'm kind of dismayed. Because the Christian lifestyle portrayed in this movie is really quite depressing and unappealing.
- And the non-Christian Babette, well, she offers this warmth and this joy and this freedom which is really attractive. And so the question is, is this really what we have to choose between if we're interested in following Jesus?
- Does Christianity have a lifestyle problem? That's the question that we're asking tonight. We're in the middle of a series called *The Problem with Christianity*. And our topic is the lifestyle problem.
- [2 : 3 2] It goes like this. The problem with Christianity is that it imposes a restrictive lifestyle on me. A bunch of old-fashioned, out-of-date rules that are regressive, authoritarian, obsessed with sin, pessimistic about the human condition, punitive, vindictive, and loveless.
- The church is like the fun police. The meter maids of morality. I could never be a Christian because it cramps my style. Takes away my freedoms and squashes my personal fulfillment and potential for true happiness.
- Is that something you've ever heard before? If you just nodded just a little bit, it would really help. Just to make me feel affirmed.
- The first thing, though, that I want to acknowledge is that this problem is actually based on some truth, right? It might be a caricature, but it's based on criticisms of Christians that are partly true.

So the film *Babette's Feast*, it reveals some of those traits that I described. And some Christian groups, over time, have focused a lot on what Christians aren't allowed to do.

[3 : 46] Maybe you've heard the old model, don't drink, smoke, dance, or chew, or go with girls that do. Do you remember that one?

One, when Christians define themselves in this negative way, they get a reputation for what they're against rather than what they're for, and it kind of feeds this lifestyle stereotype.

Second, we need to investigate the cultural narrative of absolute freedom that's behind this so-called problem. In our day, most people, they don't like the idea of rules or authority.

We hear a lot of talk about free choice for each individual. True freedom means no boundaries. That sounds good, but we all know it's just not true.

So, for example, freedom on the road means driving on the right side and stopping when the light turns red. Failure to operate by these boundaries isn't freedom, it's death.

[4 : 51] And freedom on the piano means playing a piece of music in the right key and following the rules of musical notation. Even jazz musicians have rules. And parents, you know that happiness and contentment for your children, it means loving boundaries that encourage gradual maturity and independence.

Because limitless freedom, well, that just leads to anxious and insecure kids. Perhaps you've seen this sign in a store. Unaccompanied children will be given a shot of espresso and a kitten.

There's nothing new about this lie that complete freedom will lead to your happiness and your fulfillment. It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. God gave his people there total freedom for laughter and friendship and enjoyment of beauty, satisfaction with tending the garden.

Total freedom within the boundaries of his one rule for their safety and protection. Don't eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, because when you do, you will die.

And then, Genesis chapter 3 comes, and the serpent Satan, he comes into the garden, and Satan's lie begins with a lifestyle question.

[6 : 11] Can you ever really be happy and satisfied if someone is putting restrictions on you? Why don't you take freedom into your own hands, and then you'll be like God?

Well, the Bible says that God's rules, they're not just arbitrary laws to ruin our fun. God's rules on all things are his good instructions to protect and enhance human flourishing.

I love that song, *Flourishing*, that we sang tonight. Just like when your car manufacturer says, don't put water in your gas tank, the manufacturer's not trying to ruin your freedom.

He's trying to protect and enhance your freedom to enjoy the road. We need to begin by acknowledging that some rules are for our own good, or at least that not all rules are bad.

We need to sweep away some of that false narrative that we find in our culture if we're going to really seriously tackle this lifestyle question. And this raises a question for each one of us here tonight.

[7 : 15] whose word will I trust for the boundary markers in my life? Is it going to be my own word? Is it going to be the city of Vancouver's?

My mother's? Well, the Christian worldview says, look, look, there's another voice who speaks with authority. He's Jesus.

And he offers his new life and his new lifestyle. He offers blessing within boundaries and true freedom that comes not from within myself, but freedom from one outside of myself.

So let's have a look at the words of Jesus. And the words that have been chosen for us to engage with this lifestyle problem, they're found in Matthew chapter 5. And it would be great if you had your Bible open to those words known as the Beatitudes, the first 12 verses.

You might want to call these Jesus Christian Lifestyle Manifesto. Matthew chapter 5. Here we see that Jesus gives us eight statements of blessing.

[8 : 25] Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessing, blessing, blessing. Eight times. And it's not really like anything that's ever been spoken anywhere by anyone.

G.K. Chesterton, reading these words, he was in awe of them. And he said, on first reading the Beatitudes, you feel that it turns everything upside down. But the second time you read it, you discover that it turns everything right side up.

The first time you read it, it feels that it's impossible. The second time, you feel that nothing else is possible. The theme of Jesus' words is the kingdom of heaven.

You can see it right there. It bookends the conversation. Verse 3 and verse 10. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. So Jesus is describing kingdom life, kingdom people in fact.

He's not just describing it though, he's announcing it. He's inviting men and women and children to enter into this life. And the lifestyle that goes with it. Later in the same sermon, he puts it like this.

[9 : 31] Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven. But the one who does the will of my Father, who is in heaven. Here's how one commentator elaborates.

Jesus didn't come into Galilee looking for fully formed, beatitude people that he could call into his kingdom. No. Jesus called ordinary, broken people to himself and to his kingdom.

And as a result of contact with him, as a result of submission to his rule, the qualities of blessing began to appear in their lives.

In other words, this Christian lifestyle is experienced as an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. Blessedness in all its forms is the result of the gospel breaking in, breaking into us, breaking into our lives, through to us, as we turn away from sin and we embrace the reign of Jesus Christ in our life.

And if we're going to talk about blessed this, blessed that, what is this blessed anyway? Because some people, you might read it translated simply as happy. Happy are those who mourn.

[10 : 48] But that just seems confusing because of the way we use that word happy today. Happiness is dependent on what happens in my life. Those two words come from the same root.

It comes and it goes, our happiness. But blessedness is an objective state, not a subjective feeling. Or to put it another way, blessing is the potential for life.

Blessing is the potential for life. And lastly, I want you to see that these eight characteristics, they're not describing eight different people. Like one of us here might have the blessing of being able to mourn.

The other one, the blessing of meekness. The other one, the blessing of persecution. No. He is describing eight interrelated qualities of the same person, of all kingdom people.

So with a few minutes remaining, I would like to take a closer look at just two of these blessed lifestyles. One found in verse six and the other one in 10 to 12.

[11 : 50] Let's look at verse six together. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. I think the cultural narrative of absolute freedom, it has a goal.

I'd say the goal is to be satisfied, to find happiness, personal fulfillment. Our freedom of choice will allow us to pursue whatever appetite seems appealing, whatever tastes good, as it were.

So it can be Instagram fame or a noble career, it could be true love or big trophy hunting, whatever suits your fancy. But the taste of one longing will only awaken a hunger and a thirst for more and different tastes.

It's kind of like your poor Augustus Gloop in Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. You can't stop eating because you're never satisfied. Jesus tells us that there is one thing that will fully satisfy our appetite and it's righteousness.

And righteousness here is more than just being good. It's a relationship word. It basically means in right relationship. It indicates a whole orientation of life and lifestyle turned towards God and his will for me.

[13 : 13] And this announcement of blessing for kingdom people, it has huge implications for us when we follow Jesus. So ask yourself this question. When was the last time that you were truly satisfied?

Truly satisfied. deep inner contentment, peace, security, satisfaction. Maybe you're struggling with dissatisfaction tonight.

The good news is that's okay. Peter Kreeft puts it this way. Dissatisfaction is actually the second best thing there is because it dissolves the glue that entraps us to false satisfactions and it in fact drives us to God the only true satisfaction.

satisfaction. Here's another question for you. When you read this verse, does it mean that Jesus is forbidding other appetites?

Absolutely not. Can I still enjoy other lovely things but not as the source of my chief satisfaction? Absolutely yes. I think that was the problem in Babette's feast by the way.

[14 : 20] Here's the best part. What if your hunger and your thirst for love and acceptance and happiness that we seek out in all the myriad of ways in our world, what if you were free in Christ to enjoy those things for what they are?

To experience pleasure and delight and joy from all these other things but without needing them to satisfy and fulfill your deepest longings? Wouldn't that be so freeing?

Wouldn't that make you smile and multiply your joy rather than limit you and impede your human potential? And best of all, since we're all sinners, we don't possess this righteousness that we hunger for all on our own.

So this longing that we have, it actually logically leads us to the cross of Christ where Jesus shares with us his perfect righteousness by his death and resurrection for our sake.

So what do you hunger and thirst for? What unsettles you and leaves you breathless when you go without it for too long? Is it righteousness?

[15 : 32] Why not? And second, let's look at Matthew 5, 10 to 12. It reads like this. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Well, this one is really upside down. That's probably why I chose it. How can persecution and suffering be a blessing? How can this even be true?

Persecuted for righteousness' sake. Another way of saying this would be persecuted for Jesus' sake. Persecuted because of my allegiance to him. You probably know Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

I think he's a man who understood suffering. He died in a German prisoner of war camp being persecuted for righteousness' sake. And in The Cost of Discipleship he wrote this, Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called on to suffer.

[16 : 46] In fact, it's a joy and a token of his grace. So I think this is probably where that lifestyle language we've been using begins to break down.

Because Christianity in the end it's not really a lifestyle at least not like yoga pants. As a kingdom person instead of pursuing individual happiness and fulfillment in my own absolute freedom I am experiencing joy and gladness in my unity with Christ.

In other words, the blessing here in this beatitude is the gift of an eternal perspective. It's the gift of kingdom eyes of faith.

I was at Gafcon last month and that's a global Anglican gathering maybe you heard about it the last couple weeks here at St. John's. There was a testimony of a bishop who had suffered four home invasions.

Four. Can you imagine that? Because he was a Christian. And the interviewer asked him how do you cope? Good question probably. His reply was short and simple.

[18 : 02] It is a joy to be persecuted for Christ. That's beatitude life. That's the kingdom eyes of hope. The eternal perspective.

Verse 12. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven. Jesus gave away his rights and freedoms for us. He endured persecution, suffering, and death in our place.

And he did all this so that the blessings and the rewards of his divine rights and his divine freedoms might actually become ours to possess and experience as kingdom people now and kingdom people forever.

That's the hope that we have, friends. That's the blessing that's being offered to us here. Well, we've heard Jesus speak tonight and he's offering kingdom blessings as a free gift to anyone who's simple-minded enough to say I can't afford it.

I'm too poor in spirit. And I think it's tragic to hear that some folks think that the Christian lifestyle is actually prohibitive and joyless. Because the psalmist shouts to us, taste and see that the Lord is good.

[19 : 25] Why don't you just taste and find out? New life in the kingdom of heaven. Comfort. Inheritance. Satisfaction. Mercy. Seeing the face of God.

Called a child of God. Rejoice and be glad. These are the blessings of God. Amen. Amen.