**Distinguishing Features of a Christian**

**Matthew 5:3-12 (NAS)**

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Dr. Art Georges

(Living Hope Community Church)

It is a joy to be with you this morning! I’m nervous because I don’t preach to you every week and I don’t know if you like me. And you might not like me after this. (Laughter!) I always think of those that really came to hear my beloved, your beloved Pastor Ritch, or brought family members. So I would say come back in a week or two. You’ll get to hear Ritch. The blessing of his ministry was not only what the Lord used to draw me to a saving knowledge of Christ, but also to call me into ministry. Because of his passion and faithfulness to the Word, Ritch Boerckel’s, I wanted to be able to do that as well, and so I went off to Seminary. So I say come back in a week or two. He or Josh Beakley, our other dear, beloved pastor will be preaching, and they do a great job.

This morning we are going to look into a passage of Scripture that is very famous, very well-known. It’s affectionately and popularly known as The Beatitudes. I would invite you to turn there in a copy of God’s Word, either yours or one that you would find near you in your seat back or your seat front. Turn to the gospel of Matthew; Matthew chapter 5. Now, part of the reason I’m nervous is because this took me two messages at Living Hope. But I saw that there is nothing happening after this service, so… (Laughter!) You know, I think that’s why Jesus had to multiply the loaves and feed the masses, because He was going to preach for a long time. I can’t do that, but hopefully you’ll be willing to hang in there. So Matthew chapter 5. I’m going to read verses 1-12. We’re going to focus on verses 3-12 this morning. Matthew chapter 5, in what is known overarchingly as the Sermon on the Mount. I’m reading from the New American Standard version. It may be a little different from yours if you’re using the ESV, but it’s fairly close.

***1*** *When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him.* ***2*** *He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,*

***3*** *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ***4*** *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* ***5*** *“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.* ***6*** *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.* ***7*** *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.* ***8*** *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.* ***9*** *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.* ***10*** *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ***11*** *“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.* ***12*** *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

As we think about Jesus’ teaching here in what we call The Beatitudes, we look for clues to the overall meaning of what I would call here as The Beatitudes, distinguishing features of a Christian. We see in verse 3 that Jesus is really describing the type of person who will be in the kingdom of heaven. Remember, Matthew uses that phrase, kingdom of heaven, as a title for the kingdom of God. It’s against his Jewish sensibilities to use God’s name in that title because he doesn’t want to use it in a way that would offend others, so he calls it the kingdom of heaven. But what he is really talking about is the kingdom of God. And that is the future that has been promised; this future existence when God recreates the earth and the heavens. It’s a time when Jesus returns to rule over all humanity. It’s a time when God’s will is done on earth even as it is now being done in heaven. So we take our clues to the overall meaning of these beatitudes from verse 3 and verse 10, when Jesus tells us that those who have these distinguishing characteristics will inherit the kingdom of God. He says in verse 3 and in verse 10

*…theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

So what we want to do then as we conclude that the beatitudes, what they do very succinctly is to describe those who have been born again. Jesus said unless a man is born again, he or she will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. So therefore, we would take these beatitudes as distinguishing characteristics of those who will inherit, who will be in the kingdom of heaven. And they equate to those who have been born again.

The summary title “Beatitudes” is a bit intriguing to us because our minds try to understand what exactly does that mean? Does that mean here are attitudes that you should be like? Well, yes, but that’s really not the definition of beatitudes. Beatitudes is a Latin translation of the underlying Greek word for blessed or happy, which is *makarios*. And *makarios* means both happy and it also means blessed. And so you have to figure out the meaning from the context.

Sometimes Bible teachers will rush to the idea that the characteristics described here are on the path to happiness. But I believe that sort of misses the point; the most important point. These are attitudes that are actually describing the individual who is, listen, approved by God. They are blessed because they are approved by God. And why is this important? It’s important because we live in a world that serves up to us a multitude of explanations for how happiness is derived and for where happiness can be found. Unfortunately however, the world gives us formulas for happiness that leave God out of the equation. They have nothing to do with what Jesus wants us to aim for here, which is approval with God; the God who created us and designed us for a relationship with Himself.

The world’s explanations of the path to happiness leave God out of the equation. They are basically proposing to God that He needs to be okay with whatever path we have chosen to find our happiness here on planet earth. In other words, regardless of how God has created me, I will tell Him of an alternate path that I want him to sanction and He needs to be okay with it. For instance, today we see scenarios such as this: “God, I’m a girl, but I believe that my happiness would be found in being a boy; relating and presenting as a boy. And so I want You to approve me.” “God, I was created for a heterosexual relationship, a monogamous relationship, but I believe my happiness is found in pursuing my same-sex attraction. So God, I want You to approve me in my decisions. I believe they’ll make me happy.” “God, I was created to live in fellowship with You because You created me, but I believe that my happiness is found in rejecting Your truth and pursuing a lie about where I came from, about what my purpose is, and about where I will go after this life. And God, I want You to approve it.” “God, I was designed to relate to You from the heart, but I believe that my happiness is found in pursuing approval with You by following a certain set of rules that I have created because I am comfortable with them. I will hold myself to those rules and everyone else. And God, I want You to approve me. When I say, ‘God, I want You to approve me,’ it’s because I have fashioned You into a god that I believe is representative of who You are.”

Oftentimes we’ll hear in opposition to these issues that I have just talked about and more. We’ll hear someone say, “Well my god would never condemn or disapprove of these certain things.”

So Jesus steps into the picture and He begins to teach in a way that not only contradicts with the paths of happiness that have been set before His audience, but they contradict everything that they have been taught in their lives. And yet, His teaching begins to make sense to them. Why? Because it’s really about divesting ourselves of our selfishness, our self-interest, and pursuing what would please the God who has created us. And deep down, that begins to resonate with the human heart. And so I’ve said as sort of a main idea; it’s printed for you on your note page there. What I would have us walk away with here as a main idea of these beatitudes is that Jesus gives features that all kingdom citizens share that distinguish them from those who will not inherit God’s kingdom. In other words, He is drawing a line in the sand and He’s not concerned about people walking away from His teaching.

I was thinking this morning as I was driving in, about the difference between Jesus’ teaching and many who would occupy a pulpit today. Those who would occupy many pulpits today would be fearful about coming down hard on certain issues because what will the people think? And they wouldn’t want more of these little pockets to begin to develop in their congregation where people begin to walk away from their ministry. But Jesus just puts it out there and pulls no punches.

I know there is this parable that He tells in Luke, I think it’s chapter 17, about this nobleman that went off to receive a kingdom. And he gave minas as he went off, for them. And He even says, and He says this to an audience, not just to His disciples that like Him, “but the citizens of that kingdom hated him and did not want him.” And I’m thinking that is so bold! What if I told you, “You really hate me and you’re going to hate what I’m going to tell you”? You might think, “I think I do hate this guy.” Jesus didn’t pull any punches. And he says here are distinguishing characteristics of those who will be in the kingdom. Test yourself! See if you be in the faith. See if these are your characteristics at least in some seed or geminal form.

One thing that I find really interesting about these beatitudes is I believe you can safely categorize them in two categories. They really break down in the first four. The first four really tell us about how we relate to God as kingdom citizens. And the second four, there are eight in total, and there is an expansion of the eighth in verses 11 and 12. But the second four really talk to us about how kingdom citizens relate to humanity around them. So how do they impact and how do they relate to the world? So first of all, we want to see in these first four beatitudes that citizens of God’s kingdom share these distinguishing features:

**In how they relate to God (5:3-6).**

Verses 3-6 focus primarily on how you relate to God; how those who have been born again relate to God. The first distinguishing feature in how citizens of the kingdom relate to God is poverty of spirit. Jesus says

***3*** *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed or approved by God, are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. If we did a word study on the word “poor,” there would be a couple of words that Jesus could have used in the underlying Greek at least, to be used here to describe poverty or poor. One of them would describe sort of a working-class poor person. They don’t have more than they need, but they have enough, and so they are sort of working-class poor, which is representative of many of us. We don’t have so much that we’re comfortable in any calamity about what might happen tomorrow, but we have enough. And yet, we know that there can be a certain amount of pride that builds up in that type of poor person. You know, they’re thinking, “Okay, well I’ve pulled myself up by my boot straps and I’m doing what I need to do to get by, so I’m fine. I don’t need any assistance.” There can be a lot of pride. But the word that Jesus uses here is best understood as destitute. Approved by God are the destitute in spirit.

Notice that it is in a spiritual sense. This is spiritual poverty that Jesus is aiming at. It’s reflected by the publican in the parable of the Publican and Pharisee that Jesus told. Remember, the Pharisee was so proud he’s like, “God, I’m so glad I’m not like this guy. Here’s what I do. Approve me.” But the publican, the tax collector, Jesus says, could not even raise his eyes to heaven. Instead, he just beat his chest and said, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.” And Jesus says that is the one who went away approved. Approved are those who are destitute in spirit. That’s what Jesus is driving at here. This is a distinguishing feature of the Christian, that they enter into this relationship with God by rejecting the lies of our culture, recognizing that there is nothing in them, nothing in you, nothing in me that might commend us to God. And so we cry out to God for His mercy, that His mercy might be extended to us by a merciful God. And we’re going to get to that as a characteristic. But here’s an application for us for this whole issue of being poor in spirit.

Applications are very introspective. They’re very self-examining. Here’s what I think we need to do to apply this first characteristic to ourselves. And we all fall into this. Stop trying to assess yourself by what you have done or by what you are currently doing that might earn you favor with God. Recognize that you are unable in yourself, to be approved by God. But it is in Christ and your relationship with Christ, that you are more than adequate, more than accepted by God. And that is precisely the feature that brings us to this next distinguishing characteristic of the kingdom citizen, and that is mourning. Verse 4 indicates that those who are approved by God are those who mourn.

***4*** *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

I’m convinced that we avoid mourning at all costs. We avoid deep grieving at almost any cost. We even attempt to shelter those that we love from grieving and mourning. But Jesus indicates in verse 4 that those who mourn are approved by God. And again, this is counterintuitive. Why? Because none of us is really looking for opportunities to grieve or to mourn. We even had that song, right? I don’t know if it was the 80’s or 90’s, maybe it was the late 80’s: “Don’t worry, be happy. Don’t worry, be happy.” Has anybody got the chorus? (Laughter!) It just keeps on going. And Jesus says contrary to popular opinion, approved by God are those who mourn. Why? It’s a distinguishing feature of the Christian in connection to your spiritual poverty.

This is a mourning over our sin. It’s a mourning over the reality that we have sinned and we fall short of the glory of God. This is reflected in Isaiah’s encounter with God in chapter 6 of Isaiah. He looks at the holiness of God and Isaiah, of all people, a prophet of God, says, “I am a man of unclean lips and I am undone.” He was grieving, he was mourning over his sin. And what does God do? He comforts him. This is the mourning that is reflected by the apostle Paul, the great apostle Paul. He was saved by grace, through faith, not by works so that he would not boast. And he says, “The things that I don’t want to do, I keep on doing. The things that I want to do, I don’t do. Who can rescue me from this body of sin?”

Most importantly beloved, this is the same idea that Solomon expresses when he tells us that it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting. Why? Because it sets our minds towards eternity. It sets our minds towards our own mortality, towards our own future judgment. And therefore, we mourn over our sin. Do you know what happens when someone is willing to get real with God about their sin and their sinfulness? Well, Jesus says it right here at the end of verse 4.

*for they shall be comforted.*

Here is what happens. It’s glorious! When someone is willing to get real with God, not only the unbeliever, but the believer as well, the Holy Spirit ushers them into the presence of the cross, shows them Jesus pouring out His life as a substitute for their debt, and then sends them the echo of the cry of Jesus. “It is finished!” Paid in full! And by faith, they are comforted.

I was thinking this morning as I reflected on what I wanted to say, it made me think of that great hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul*.

“My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought

My sin, not in part, but the whole,

Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, o my soul!”

I thought about having us just start singing that, but I’m the only one with the microphone, and I didn’t want you to have to hear that.

How do we apply this? Here’s what we need to do. We need to remind ourselves afresh that sin brings about a sorrowing. But we must make sure that our sin and the sorrowing over it is not towards the world, not towards getting caught, not towards disappointing some earthly audience, even our own high opinion of ourselves; that we thought we were better than this. But our sorrowing is towards God. It is a Godly sorrowing and it issues forth in repentance that leads to life. And it doesn’t just happen at salvation. It happens again and again and again. So Jesus can say, “Blessed are those who are continually mourning, because they shall be comforted.”

The next distinguishing characteristic in how kingdom citizens relate to God is found in verse 5. It is meekness. It is gentleness. Most of our modern translations read gentle.

***5*** *“Blessed are the gentle,*

That is probably helpful because meekness is often confused with weakness. But understand that meekness is a weakness, in a sense. It is a choosing to be weak in our own strength and to avail ourselves of God’s strength. It is a conscious decision not to strike out on our own, but rather, to entrust ourselves to the power of God to not only protect us but to deal with our reputation, to deal with the things that we could take into our own hands. We leave room for the vengeance of God because God says, “Vengeance belongs to Me.”

Again, meekness or gentleness is best understood as the conscious decision to choose God’s strength over our own. As the apostle Paul would say, “In my weakness, God’s strength is made perfect.” The reason that this is a distinguishing feature of the Christian, the one who will be a citizen of the kingdom, is because they allow God’s power to defend them. I was reflecting on Philippians 4:4. It says

**Philippians 4:4-5** Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

And James goes even further and he says, “Don’t complain brethren against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged. Behold, the judge is standing right at the door.” That’s how we can be gentle. That’s how we can be meek. It’s because we understand that the judge is standing at the door. You see, citizens of God’s kingdom understand this. And they are at least trying to grow in their gentleness before God. The meek or the gentle individual is the one who embraces God’s sovereignty over all things. They do not have to crush others because they realize their calling by God to reflect Christ. And they have the spirit of Christ dwelling in them so that they don’t have to take matters into their own hands. They trust God and His ultimate judgment. That’s why Hebrews 12:14 would say

**Hebrews 12:14** Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

Blessed are the meek, the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Friends, this is so different from the spirit of the world, isn’t it? And while we as believers have this feature, sometimes we allow ourselves to be disfigured by our own flesh. And Christian, we need to lay hold of the reality that the justice that you get in your own strength will never satisfy. God’s justice ultimately will prevail and it will be way better than anything you could have done to strike out on your own. Friends, therefore, that is the application. Embrace God’s sovereignty in the circumstances that you find yourself in when your own strength wants to well up and strike out for yourself. Trust God! Trust what God is doing. Trust the process. Trust that in His sovereign care for you, He has allowed something that He will ultimately use for His glory and for your good.

And there is this fourth distinguishing feature that Jesus marks as a feature of the Christian. Again, it has to do with how citizens of God’s kingdom relate to God.

***6*** *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

Those who are approved by God are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. You see, we well know that the human body requires and even craves food and water in order to survive. Hunger and thirst are natural drives that cause us to do what is necessary to eat and to drink. But just as with our physical diet of food and drink, we don’t always eat and drink what we should. Amen? It is Christmas time, right?

My family made, for the first time, I think it was, no-bake cookies. They’re my favorite! You know, with lots of cocoa and sugar and butter and oatmeal. I’m just getting you hungry, right, just talking about it. Those cookies kind of ruined me. I kept on walking by and eating them. So with our physical diet of food and drink, we don’t always eat and drink what is best for us, and it takes a toll on our physical well being. And so also, we often feast and drink to our own spiritual harm. We feast and we drink at the spiritual altar tables that the world tells us will satisfy, will fill us up. We seek after the food of self-interest, self-esteem. We drink from the poisoned well of accomplishments, achievements, wealth, power, pleasure, only to find that it never really satisfies. And all the while, what we really require, what will really satisfy us is pursuing rightness with the God who created us for His glory and for His pleasure. And He gives us instructions on how to live right.

I visited with my family down in southern Indiana just in the last couple of days. My brother had this big plaque over his desk and it was from Micah 6:8. “Do justice, live humbly…” I can’t remember what it is now. I have too many Scriptures in my head. I looked at him and I said, “Oh, that’s cool! Micah 6:8.” He said, “What? That’s from the Bible?” You see, when we know these things, we know that that is what we are to do. We know it is from God. And so we read God’s Word and we see the path to righteousness. We see how we are called to live and called to interact with our God, to be humble. And that is what it means to pursue righteousness.

Isn’t it amazing that in the gospel of Matthew it says that when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he sought to put her away? Why? Because he was a righteous man. But because of his righteousness, he was able to be steered, guided, directed by God through a dream to go ahead and marry her. And when we choose to pursue righteousness and drink from the well of righteousness, then God can guide us. This is what it means to be a citizen of God’s kingdom. To be born again is to begin to live in such a way that we want to please God. And then by His Word and by others who speak His Word into our lives, we can pursue righteousness.

***6*** *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

So what is our application? Here’s what we really have to do. Just as if we are wanting to be healthy physically,…You know what? I hate drinking water, except when I preach. I don’t drink enough of it. And I know if I’m going to be healthy, I need to drink more water. I know if I’m going to be healthy, I need to eat the right things. If you and I are going to be healthy, we need to feast on the Word of God. The Word of God will direct us in paths of righteousness for God’s sake. When God finally awakens us to the inadequacies of the attempts of the world to fill themselves, when we recognize our spiritual poverty and we mourn and we become weak that He might be strong, it is then and only then, that we allow God to take us to the streams that make glad. We allow God to make us to lie down in the green pastures, to lead us beside still waters, to guide us in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. So here’s the application. Guard yourself from spiritual junk food and drink that the world falls for and fails to satisfy. Come to the realization that the Word of God is what you need for righteousness sake.

So I’ve told you that the first four in verses 3-6 are really about how we relate to God. There is not a hard and fast…it’s not discreet. It doesn’t fade away from how we treat one another, but it is inextricably linked to the first and greatest commandment, as Jesus said is the second that is like it. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself.” In fact, you can’t do the second unless you are focused on doing the first. And you can’t say you are doing the first unless you are seeking to obey the second commandment. And so also with these beatitudes, the second four are really focused as a result of our relationship with God, our having been born again, to impacting how we relate to humanity. So citizens of God’s kingdom share these distinguishing features:

**In how they relate to humanity (5:7-12).**

There used to be a clock down here. I think it was Mark Hitchcock, the prophetic speaker that spoke at our prophetic conference several years ago. He said, “Do you know what it means when a pastor takes off his watch? Nothing!” (Laughter!) I want it to mean something. What time are we supposed to be done? Oh, I’ve got lots of time; 10:00 to 11:15 or so. We’re doing okay, I think.

This second group of beatitudes are really focused…again, it’s not a hard and fast division. They both impact the first and the second. But this is really aimed at how we relate towards humanity. Recognize with me that once you come to know God, then you begin to value the image of God in your fellow man. So much so that you can’t say, “I love God,” and yet hate your brother. And so much so that you can’t say, “Well, I’m loving my brother, but I’m just not really interested in this whole God-thing.” Because you won’t love your brother in the way that God calls. He calls us to love sacrificially, because of the image of God and not because it does something for us. So just as verses 3-6 are true for those who have been born again, we still need to be encouraged, we need to be reminded, we need to be exhorted to live them out. That’s why Scripture says things like, “just as you already love, love even more.” That’s why Paul would remind the believers at Colossae that “as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.” We need to be exhorted towards these things. And so they are essential to possess and to be growing in. And the first one in how we relate to humanity is mercy. Those who have inherited the kingdom have this distinguishing quality. They are merciful because they have received mercy.

***7*** *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

Approved by God are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. This always trips people up because they think, “Well, haven’t we already received it? Isn’t it already a done deal? It makes it look like this is hanging on how good I am at being merciful.” And I would say, you’re right! Those who have had their lives transformed just become these more merciful people. But there are things that can hinder our own showing mercy. Mercy is governed by the ability to have compassion, and in that compassion, to pity another. Mercy identifies the pitiful state of another, and in compassion, either supplies a need or releases from a debt. Sometimes it’s both release and supply. Mercy is demonstrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan. Recall that the Samaritan was the individual who met the needs of the traveler who had been beaten and left for dead. And mercy was shown at great expense. And it was not based on a relationship. It was shown at great inconvenience, even. Just as God showed mercy to the citizens of His kingdom through the costly sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. And that is 1 Peter 1:3.

**1 Peter 1:3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again…

Oftentimes, if we’re willing to admit it, what stops our mercy giving is our judgmental spirit. It’s easy for me to assess that you don’t deserve my mercy. But having this spirit of mercy is not optional, even though most, if not all of us, struggle to apply it in all instances. We have to guard ourselves from the spirit of judgmentalness. James says

**James 2:13** For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

So this is an aspect of showing compassion and pity, supplying and releasing. So how do we apply this? I would encourage you to examine yourself and ask if there are any recent sightings of mercy-giving in your life. Can I look back on my recent history and see where I gave mercy where it wasn’t that it was necessarily deserved or undeserved, but it was a need, and it was God in me that encouraged me to apply it? Ask yourself, “Am I recognizing my own constant need for God’s mercy?” if you’re struggling in this category.

Jesus goes on to give us another characteristic of those kingdom citizens, those who have been born again, and how they relate to humanity. He says

***8*** *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

They are pure in heart; transformed, I would add, by the Spirit. Not only are kingdom citizens, those who have been born again, distinguished by mercy, but secondly, by purity of heart. Citizens of God’s kingdom are pure in heart. They’ve been transformed by the Spirit. They are relating to others from the basis of a pure heart. And we would ask ourselves, what is a pure heart? How do you get that? What’s that all about? We remind ourselves that biblically, the heart is the center of who you are. Scripture often speaks of your mission control center as your heart; sometimes the soul and sometimes the heart. Jesus said out of the overflow of the heart comes all sinful practices. And a person who has been born again has received a new heart, a purified heart, a heart that is tuned to God.

But sometimes, I don’t know if when you travel in your car, you try to find a certain AM station. If you’ve had that experience, you get close to it and you can kind of hear the voice, but you can’t really hear it. So you have to keep on tuning in the dial. And that’s what we need to remind ourselves of. We may have had our hearts purified, but we need to continue to pursue this purity of heart. The person who has been born again has this new heart, even according to the Old Testament statements of the new covenant that Jesus established. And how do our hearts get purified? It’s by believing the gospel. Here’s what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:22. He says

**1 Peter 1:22** Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls (or your heart) for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart,

Jesus says in verse 8

***8*** *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

Those who have been born again have had their hearts purified first by believing God’s Word, but secondly, by growing in their knowledge and understanding of God’s Word. If you tell me that you’re not reading God’s Word, if you’re willing to admit that, and therefore you’re not growing in your understanding of God’s Word, I would want to be gracious to you, but I would also want to tell you that you’re probably not someone who is growing in purity of heart. And you’re very likely snagged by fleshly desires and the lusts of the world. And the reason we come together on a Sunday morning, on a Lord’s Day, is to study God’s Word and to encourage ourselves on to love and good works. How? By the studying and the application of God’s Word. I was stunned fairly early on in ministry when I came across 1 Timothy 1:5 because it told me the goal of ministry, my ministry in the Word. Paul says to Timothy

**1 Timothy 1:5** But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

So the reason that we study, the reason that we get together and we do our Bible studies, our adult Sunday Schools and Children’s ministries, and time in the Word during the worship service, is to purify our hearts. Purity of heart causes us to love God better and therefore, love one another better. Purity of heart guards us from loving others, loving one another because it benefits us in some earthly way.

So by way of application, ask yourself, “Am I growing in my understanding of God’s Word? And is it causing me to care for others better?” And if you would honestly say no, then say, “I’m not big on New Year’s Resolutions, but perhaps that’s one that I will take on. I will seek to cover a good portion of the Bible in this next year.” You can get resources, daily readings that would get you through the Bible in a year. Sometimes people take it over two or three years. But are you committed to a purity of heart? That will come about, I tell you, through the reading and the soul-searching and application of Scripture.

Jesus gives another distinguishing characteristic of the kingdom citizen and how they relate to humanity.

***9*** *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

Here is the distinguishing characteristic as we relate to humanity. Those who are kingdom citizens are peacemakers, pursuing as they were pursued. They are pursuing others just as they were pursued. One of the greatest needs of all around us is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

We’ve just celebrated Christmas, His coming. But we always remind ourselves, and in fact, we say in the membership class, and we derived our material from Bethany. Jesus didn’t ask us to remember His birth, but He did ask us to remember His death and resurrection. And so the reason that we celebrate the birth is to remind ourselves of why He came. Last year I preached to you that He came and took on flesh and blood so that He might destroy the devil, who had the power of death, and might free those who all their lives, were enslaved to sin. And so, we’ve just celebrated this. And it is the best news that we could hear. It is the news that we are called to pursue others with.

Even good churches are struggling with evangelism. We believe that it’s important. We call ourselves evangelicals. But how many of us are really actually out there sharing the faith, sharing Christ with those in our circle of influence? Unbelievers around us have a need of the gospel. In our mercy, do you see how this works? In our mercy, we are called to first and foremost be peacemakers. The ultimate peace that we experience and that we can offer to others is peace with God. In fact, we are called to take that message. And when we do, part of why we don’t like to take it is because it is hard work, right? It is a spiritual battle. But the armor of God includes feet fitted with the gospel so that we do not lose ground, so that we keep our footing, and so that we go and we continue to pursue others with the good news of Jesus Christ. We are those who have been reconciled with God through the message of peace. Isn’t that what the angels announced at the Annunciation? Peace on earth and good will to men who have found favor with God. And that is what we are called to do. We are called to take that message of peace with God.

It’s not simply peace because of our own rebellious spirit. Sometimes we forget that the wrath of God is trained on unbelievers. “Oh, my god wouldn’t do that! He’s not a wrathful god.” But that’s not what Scripture says. Before we came to Christ, we were by nature, children of wrath, even as the rest. God’s wrath is trained on unbelieving humanity. And He’s not sitting up there like, “Let Me at them!” He’s sitting up there patiently and expectantly letting us take that peacemaking message to others. We are called to be ambassadors of the gospel; the peace that God offers in relationship with Himself. And that, again, comes through a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 53:5 says the punishment that brought us peace fell upon Him and by His stripes we are healed.

Friends, we must always remember that we are in a spiritual battle. And it’s not with unbelievers, those around us. It’s with the forces of darkness that control unbelief. And the same armor of warfare includes feet fitted with the gospel. And it is the gospel of Jesus only that advances the kingdom of God. It’s the same kingdom that Jesus is discussing here. That gospel will disarm arguments and strongholds of unbelief. And that same gospel will help fellow believers grow in our peace with God. Even believers experience a lack of peace with God because they need to be reminded by one another that we have peace with God through Christ. And so we gather to remind ourselves of that.

So by way of application, ask yourself, how is my life directed at helping others to believe and find peace with God? There are a myriad of ways that it can be done. It doesn’t have to be the door-to-door characterization of evangelism. It can be friendship evangelism, taking advantage of the relationships that you have, the people that God has placed inside of your sphere of influence, where you can share with them how you came to have peace with God and how they can as well.

There is a final characteristic that Jesus puts before us here in verse 10. And it happens, generally, as a result of trying to be a peacemaker. The distinguishing characteristic of those who are kingdom citizens as they relate to humanity is that they are persecuted when aligning with God’s Word.

***10*** *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ***11*** *“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.* ***12*** *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Finally, citizens of God’s kingdom, those who have been born again, are distinguished by how they relate to the world, and in doing so, by the rejection that they experience by the unbelieving world. Persecution is the lot, friends. It is our expected outcome in living for Christ. It is the experience that every believer in some way or another should expect. Jesus said in John 15:20

**John 15:20** Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you;

Notice Jesus didn’t say, “If they persecuted me, they might persecute you.”

Mary Beth and I lived in Atlanta for about 2 ½ years, and the southern way is to fall over yourself not to offend. So when they make a suggestion, they say, “Well, you might could do this.” Did you learn that in school? You’re an actuary. You must not have taken any English. “You might could do this.” We were like, “What is going on here?” But it’s their willingness, and Christians adopt this same willingness, to fall over ourselves in order not to offend because we also don’t want to be persecuted for calling people to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But Jesus says, “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”

The Apostle Paul says it’s been appointed for us not only to believe, but to suffer on His behalf. But he says, don’t worry. When you suffer and they are persecuting you, to them it spells out destruction, but to you, salvation. I believe that impacted the Apostle Paul as they were stoning Stephen. And he looked at the grace and the mercy and the forgiveness being importuned by Stephen as he is being stoned. And that had to impact the Apostle Paul that this one was willing to die for his faith and belief in Jesus Christ.

Now, I enjoy Chick-fil-A a lot. How many of you enjoy Chick-fil-A? I know. What time is it? It’s hungry time. Part of the attraction for me has always been that this was a decidedly Christian organization, one that was willing to stand for Christian morality. Not just its commitment to some Sabbath, which really isn’t imposed upon Christians, but the fact that they were willing to take a stance for Christ. And so just recently, having heard that they have backed off of their stance, you know what? That takes away my incentive to want to go there over another place. I’m glad that people are still courteous and I’m glad people are eating chicken. I like chicken. But what attracted me was this willingness to take a stand for Christ. And what disappoints me is an unwillingness.

And this is happening in our culture more broadly. And when we see it happen, we understand why. Chick-fil-A decided that this was not going to be good for their business model. They were going to have people rioting and picketing against them and it would be better just to back off of those organizations that they had supported in the past, who also took decidedly Christian stances. But friends, do you know what? The people that would have picketed them and rioted are no more willing to go and eat there when they pull back that stance. They’re going to go on to the next crusade. It’s like Jesus says,
“If you were of the world, the world would love you. But because you have taken a stance for My Word, the world will hate you.” As Christians, we need to get this in our heads and we need to not shy away from the persecution that we will receive when we take a stance for Christ. Why? Because Jesus says it is a distinguishing characteristic of those who are born again. And so wherever we’re at in this today, we need to ask God to give us much grace to want to take a stand for Him. As an application, ask God to strengthen your resolve to stand for Him and not side with the world. Fear God rather than men!

So friends, let me remind you here on the heels of Christmas that what we’re really talking about here is the new birth. We’re really talking about distinguishing characteristics of those who have been born again. Jesus came that He might be, as John the Baptist identified him, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Who, through His death on the cross and His resurrection, by faith in Him, brings us into a relationship with God that is found only by Him.

I heard someone say, “Was Jesus a good teacher?” And they would say by the world’s standards, no, because Jesus was very intolerant. Jesus says there is no other way to heaven. Jesus says the only way to the Father is through Me, and there are not many ways to heaven. So as we come here to worship in the wake of the celebration of His coming, we have to always remember that it’s Jesus’ resurrection from the dead that demonstrates that God has accepted His substitutional sacrifice on behalf of those who believe. Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through Me.” So receiving Jesus as our Savior and our Lord,… “Why do you call me Lord and not do what I say?” So we receive Him not simply as Savior, but as Lord. That brings us into this relationship with God marked by humility. It’s a humility that is really delineated by these distinguishing characteristics. So wherever we find ourselves today in manifesting these characteristics, let me remind you of what Peter says. He gives a similar list of qualifications or qualities of the believer and then he says this:

**2 Peter 1:8-9** For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities, is blind or shortsighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.

So perhaps there are three types of people here today. There are those who would humbly and filled with joy, say, “You know what? By God’s grace, these characteristics do distinguish me. And I know that they’re not my own origin. It’s God in me, the hope of glory.” And then there are those who would say, “Yes, I’ve got most of them happening, but they’re not where I want them to be.” Do you see the humility there? God can take that and He can encourage you by His Spirit and by His Word to continue to grow in these distinguishing characteristics. But there is a third type of person, here. This is one who would say, “I just came because somebody made me come.” Or “I came because it’s the thing you do around Christmas and Easter time.” Or “I came because God is up to something in my life, but I don’t know what.” And if that describes you, that third category, this could be the favorable day of salvation. It could be the time when you humble yourself, recognize your sin before a holy God, mourn over that sin, but then receive the cleansing that He grants through faith in Jesus Christ. God made Him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf so that we, through faith in Him, might receive His righteous standing and eternal life. And that can be yours today.

So I want to close with a simple prayer. It’s not a prayer that has magic words or catch phrases that God hears more than others. It’s just simply a prayer that would lead one who might be trusting Christ for the first time, to appeal to God for that cleansed conscience. And so you would simply bow your heads, and you can do it silently and just repeat after me, what I say. “Heavenly Father, I am a sinner. And I understand that my life has been rebellion against you. But today, I believe that Jesus came that He might die for me. And I believe that He died for my sins and He rose. And I believe that you have accepted His sacrifice on my behalf. So I ask that you would help me to turn away from the things that are displeasing to you and to live a life that is pleasing to you, embracing your help to be the person that you’ve called me to be; to be a person that is distinguished by the characteristics we looked at this morning. And I look forward to spending all of eternity with you.”