

There is nothing more precious to Christians than the Gospel as the Apostle Paul expressed it in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5: **For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve.**

Those events are of first importance. So, I say cautiously and with deep reverence that it is possible that we Evangelicals have focused on them so exclusively that they become a cliché. Even Jesus has become unreal. The name Jesus is attached to the Man who died at the hands of the Romans on Good Friday, but that Man has no “face,” no voice, no personality, no history. That’s what happens when a pastor spends most of his time in the letters of the New Testament. The explanations that Paul, Peter, and John give of Jesus’ death and resurrection are indispensable for the Christian faith, but Jesus Himself can disappear behind those explanations.

In our Evangelical parlance we like to talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We insist on that. We say it makes eternal life possible. But it’s hard to have a personal relationship with explanations. It’s hard to fall in love with explanations. It’s like falling in love with a ghost. Who is the Person the first disciples left everything to follow? Who is the Person who inspired such love and such hate in first century Palestine? Who is the Person we are asked to follow, to love, and to make sacrifices for?

The only way to find out is to pay attention to the Gospels of the New Testament. We have no other access to Jesus than the eyewitness accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They report what He did, and it astounds us. But do you know what? However impressive a person’s accomplishments may be, we don’t know the person who did them until he opens his mouth and starts talking. Until then, he is still in the shadows.

Jesus steps out of the shadows in the Sermon on the Mount. You don’t have to listen long before you realize that if we are going to have a personal relationship with Him, the relationship will be on His terms, and we had better be prepared for the ride of our lives. The past five sermons have been efforts to hear Him in His own words. Having heard Him, there’s no going back. I’m not sure I could go back. I am quite sure I don’t want to go back. I am also quite sure I don’t know what the path forward has in store.

I also drew you along with me by asking you to stand with me before God and this congregation the past two Sundays and by faith to make brave commitments to Him. I was deeply moved by your quiet and powerful response. What does it mean for BVBC?

Controlled Intensity

I can only answer that question by telling you what I see, and what I see has marked me for the rest of my life. Don’t underestimate its power to mark you as well. Here is the Jesus I saw, as He stepped out of the shadows of our Christian clichés. The first thing I saw was His controlled intensity. It’s easy for a person to be controlled and have no passion. It’s easy for a person to be passionate and be out of control. The control and the intensity were in harmony and at home in Him. I’ll come back to the control later. Think about His intensity for a moment.

Do you remember these three sayings? **“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:20) **“Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”**

(Matthew 5:48) **Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness.** (Matthew 6:33) The Man who said that is intense about the righteousness of God.

Here's one more. Jesus said: **"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."**

(Matthew 7:13-14) The word that shouts at me is the word **narrow**: **"narrow the road that leads to life."** There is one thing for sure about narrow roads. You have to pay attention, when you travel on them. They have no shoulders, and the drop-off on either side can be steep, and on-coming traffic can be tricky. Obedience to the words of Christ makes the road narrow, and that makes the journey dangerous, and that makes the destination joyful. Wherever the narrow way takes BVBC, all who make the journey need to pay attention.

And here's the piece you don't want to miss. Jesus' intensity gives us permission to be intense about righteousness. The world we inhabit gives us permission to be intense about our favorite causes. You can be intense about cleaning up the environment; you cannot be intense about holiness. You can be intense about finding a cure for cancer; you cannot be intense about your moral character. You can be intense about clean drinking water for Africa; you cannot be intense about God.

Our irritable age does not give us permission to be intense about righteousness. It actually discourages people from being intense about righteousness. Cutting people down to size morally is a cottage industry. "Yes, I know he had a religious experience, but he's also the biggest hypocrite you'll ever meet." And the last thing you want someone to say about you is, "Oh! She is so righteous." The word *righteous* has been contaminated along with the words *virtue* and *holy* and *character*. We are losing the vocabulary with which to call people to aspire to be godly people.

Jesus restores these words to our vocabulary and gives them a place of honor. He releases us from the cynicism that plagues our moral discourse. He gives us permission to be intense about righteousness just like He was. He gives us permission to aspire to be like God.

Compassionate Realism

I saw something else about Jesus, as He stepped out of the shadows of our Christian clichés. His is the compassionate realist. Yes, He is intense about righteousness. Yes, He really wants us to be righteous. But He is under no illusions about our resistance to righteousness. His realism shows up at several points.

He says, **"Do not just, or you will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged."** (Matthew 7:1) Without scolding anybody, He makes you aware of your own liability to judgment. He says, **"You, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children."** (Matthew 7:11) Some political activists and preachers make a career out of causing people to feel guilty. Jesus bluntly says, **"You are evil,"** and in the next breath praises you for doing good things for your children. He is not only realistic about our evil; He is also compassionate about us.

You see the same compassionate realism in the way He taught us to pray. **"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."** Again, He doesn't scold. He takes for granted our resistance to righteousness, and gives us a way to be godlike by forgiving each other the way God forgives us.

And here's another piece you don't want to miss. He gives us permission to be intense about righteousness without a trace of self-righteousness or self-importance. He did it in two sentences: **“How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”** (Matthew 7:1-5)

If you are looking for one foothold from which you can make your way through the Sermon on the Mount, that's it. The moral zealot has not been on the job ten minutes before he descends into intolerance, innuendo, and an inability to hear what other people say. It is hard to learn that you always have a plank in your eye, and you are the last person to see it, until you learn to look for it, or some fearless person points it out to you.

Never stop looking for **the plank in your own eye**. Before you judge another person, before you get angry with another person, before you reject another person, ask yourself, “What in my life is displeasing to God and to other people?” You'll never again be impressed by your own righteousness, and you'll have more patience with the failures of other people.

Friend of Underdogs

Finally, Jesus is the Friend of underdogs. His compassion goes as deep as His realism about people requires. Nothing reveals this better than the Beatitudes, especially the first four. The first four Beatitudes do not bless people for their spiritual achievements. They bless them precisely because of their spiritual deprivation. These are people who, despite their dreams and their efforts, are spiritually impoverished, grief-stricken, powerless, and unrighteous. The Father is on their side. He is the Angel of Mercy at their side in deprivation.

The greatest temptation of those of us in this room is to think Jesus meant someone else, not us. He was talking to us when He said: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:3) The dominant attitude among most of us in the Brandywine Valley is to say: **I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.** (Revelation 3:17) That begins to change, and we begin to experience our moral impoverishment, when we try to love our enemies or control our lust or be reconciled with an antagonist. Before long we start to think, “It's just not possible. How can I do this? Why should I do it? I don't want to do it. That's not the real world. It's an impossible agenda.”

In that moment I hope you can hear the Friend of all morally impoverished underdogs saying to you, “I know it's hard for you. I know you fail and feel bad and want to give up. But I don't want you go through life thinking that not killing somebody and not committing adultery and just punching your ticket on Sunday morning is doing the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven. That barely reaches the bare minimums. I need to jar you, waken you, rock your world, and make you feel your moral poverty. You like to measure how good you are by comparing yourself to the next guy. It's the wrong yardstick. The yardstick is God Himself. That's what makes you say, ‘It's impossible.’ That's what makes you feel your moral poverty and regret it. My blessing for you is that you are never closer to me than when you feel the farthest away, and you regret it.”

Wise and Foolish

Jesus wrapped up the Sermon on the Mount with a simple story of two houses. **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”** (Matthew 7:24-27)

I hope your determination to follow Christ is stronger than ever after seeing His controlled intensity, His compassionate realism, and His friendship with underdogs. So, what does putting Jesus’ words into practice require of us? How do we start, if we want to be as intense about righteousness as Jesus was? My pastoral advice is this: start your day right. C. S. Lewis gave me just the help I needed many years ago. He said this in his classic book, *Mere Christianity* (pages 167-168): “This is why the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back, in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.”

Do you have a Bible app on your smart phone or tablet or the *Daily Bread* or some other printed material that offers a verse for the day? That verse or two will help you to take that other point of view, God’s point of view, on life. Think for a few minutes how it might affect your life that day.

Then read scripture and pray. Again, the *Daily Bread* or an on-line resource can help you. If you don’t have either, pray the Lord’s Prayer. Then, pray for the people you love best. It takes about 10-12 minutes.

Thanks to the Sermon on the Mount, you can remind yourself of the confession you made before God and the congregation. “I will never stop looking for the plank in my own eye. I will be merciful. I will be a peacemaker.” Those promises help keep your attention focused that day on **the narrow way that leads to life.**

One more thing: put on your “game face” for the day. Your game face is your determination and concentration to treat each person that has your attention that day as sacred. You give each person your undivided attention. You listen for any opportunity you might have to bless and help this person.

I find it hard to keep my game face on all day. The gravitational pull of past habits and my own interests and the sheer intensity of any given moment draw me away from putting Jesus’ words into practice. Don’t worry about it. Put your game face on again tomorrow morning and be ready for the first person you see. In you the kingdom of heaven makes itself felt in the world right now.