

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / June 26, 2022 / Pastor Jeff Harrison
Biblical Responses to Cultural Messaging (Building Faith at Home)
No One Can Tell Anyone How to Live, So Live However You Want? (various passages)

Jesus did not fit in perfectly with any group from His day

Good morning, let's pray...

Jesus didn't fit in perfectly with any of the groups of His day, whether the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, or any group from the Greco-Roman culture. So Jesus' followers today shouldn't fit in perfectly with any group in our culture. There's always some difference between a culture's messages and God's message, some disagreement is inevitable.

It's why, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed some common messages from His culture and then shared God's better alternative to these cultural messages.

With God's help, we're seeking something similar in our *Building Faith at Home* series. We're addressing common messages from our culture and looking to the scriptures to see God's better alternative to these messages.

Relevance: Evaluating common cultural messages is part of living well

We're doing this because messages matter. The messages we believe about God and about ourselves, and about other people and the purpose of life, these messages make a huge difference in how we live.

So we want to evaluate the messages we receive. Just because we hear something frequently, or just because something is assumed by many, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's a good and true message.

Here in the church, we want to live by God's messages, the ones that are loving and true and that lead to living well.

As we address cultural messages, there may be some disagreement here. But addressing these cultural messages is important enough to have the conversation, even if some think I'm saying too little, or too much, or disagree with something I say.

And whether you're a follower of Jesus or just exploring things spiritually, if I say something you disagree with or want to process further, I'd be glad to get together.

Orienting to message: “There’s no universal truth, so one has a right to tell anyone how to live; live however you want as long as you’re not harming others.”

Now last Sunday, we addressed the cultural message that, “Life is found in looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy.”

We considered how cultural filters can hinder us from truly looking inside, and how this cultural message can bring burdensome pressure, and how any identity or happiness strategy that we create ourselves is ultimately insecure and insufficient.

So Jesus is the right guide for your life. The only One providing identity and happiness that is ultimately secure and more than sufficient.

Today, we’re covering a related cultural message, that, “There’s no universal truth, so no one has a right to tell anyone how to live; live however you want as long as you’re not harming others.”

Putting last week and this morning’s cultural messages together, here’s how Pastor Tim Keller describes them: “Historically, truth is something ‘out there’ and inside you are feelings. And when you find the truth, you are to bring your feelings in line with the truth. But we are the first culture in history... being told truth is actually inside you and everything “out there” is the culturally constructed feelings. So we’re told, you go inside yourself and find truth and then come back out with your truth and tell everyone, ‘you must accommodate me and my truth.’

So historically, if you went as a missionary to another place, you could talk with people of other faiths with commonality. The missionary and the native person each telling each other that there’s a truth: a good, right, divine way to believe and live, and they’d debate what that is.

Now in our culture, we say the opposite. Our culture says the problem is telling people that they must be saved, that they must align with some truth. Our culture says that’s wrong for anyone to do. Our culture says the solution is letting everyone define right and wrong for themselves, and to live as each person sees fit, an exaltation of the... individual.”¹

¹ Tim Keller speech found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uq8NPWbEo5w>

To say all that more briefly, “There’s no universal truth, so no one has a right to tell anyone how to live; live however you want as long as you’re not harming others.”

I quoted a line from the movie *Frozen* last Sunday. Here’s another from that same song that fits this morning’s cultural message, “I don’t care what they’re going to say.”

This morning’s cultural message says that no person or group has any authority over you, so do what makes you happy as long as you’re not directly harming others.

And this cultural message also says, “If you tell someone to do something other than what they feel inside, you’re attacking the heart of their personhood. You have no right to tell anyone how to live or believe.”

It’s a cultural message that some think is so self-evident that it shouldn’t even be questioned, though it doesn’t have any basis in scientific fact, nor any grounding in God’s Word. It’s just a common belief in our particular culture.

Teaching: Problems with and biblical responses to this morning’s cultural message

This message is self-defeating and not as humble as it appears – So let’s examine whether this belief, this cultural message, is a good one.

First, I wonder if this cultural message is self-defeating. After all, when someone says, “There’s no universal truth”, they contradict themselves because they are making a universal statement while saying there’s no universal truth.

Relatedly, if I came up front this morning and said, “No one in this room is allowed to make any rules” then you shouldn’t listen to me. Because I’ve just violated my statement by making a rule.

So when someone says, “No one has a right to tell anyone how to live...” they’ve just violated their statement, as they’ve just told everyone how to live.

Not only is this morning’s cultural message self-defeating in these ways, but I also wonder if it’s not as humble as it first appears. Since people, including me, want to be right, some in our culture wonder if it’s arrogant to say that there’s one true faith everyone should live by.

So some in our culture instead say, “There’s no universal truth. Christianity is true for you, but Islam is true for other people.” Others in our culture try to mix and match

various faiths. For example, a person might take some teachings from Christianity, some teachings from Islam, some from stoicism, mix in some Buddhist meditation, thinking they're avoiding arrogance by taking from many faiths, humbly open to everything.

But as Christian author Rebecca McLaughlin notes, it's not actually humble to mix and match faiths, because you're not taking any of those faiths seriously. For example, the Bible doesn't say, "take what you want from Jesus' teachings, and discard what you don't like, and feel free to bring in other faiths to your worship as well." No; Christianity, Islam, and other faiths contradict each other in ways where they can't be true at the same time.

So McLaughlin says that anyone mixing and matching faiths is actually acting like they're a power above all the faiths who can do violence to each of them as they mix and match them as they please. So maybe this morning's cultural message is not as humble as it first appears.

If you think about it, anyone embracing this morning's cultural message also implies, "I've assessed all the world's belief systems and concluded that none of them have a real claim to truth. And I've assessed you and determined that you're just a product of your background. You can't think for yourself or see what's true, so don't tell anyone how to live." To me, these kinds of claims don't sound so humble.

In response to this morning's cultural message, McLaughlin notes, "We've gotten to a point in western culture where it's considered violence at worse or embarrassment at best to try to change someone's mind, especially about religious questions. When in fact it is actually the greatest sign of respect to another person to say, 'I take your beliefs seriously. I see you not just as a product of your culture or background, I see you as a thinking agent with the right to change to your mind. So I'd like to persuade you to what I see as truth, and I'm open to you persuading me, as I don't want to sit around in my ignorance.' And I think it's patronizing to be good with someone else sitting around in their ignorance... Ultimately, we respect each other far more if we're willing to disagree."²

² <https://www.rebeccamclaughlin.org/videos>

We should not be in charge because some of our desires are harmful – Not only is this morning’s cultural message self-defeating and not as humble as it first appears, but I wonder if it adequately accounts for our harmful desires.

If I live authentically from what’s inside me, with no accountability, fully in charge of my own life, living out all my desires, then I’ll cause harm. I recently heard Pastor Kevin DeYoung address this by highlighting the story of Esau in Genesis chapter 25. There Isaac, the son of Abraham, and his wife Rebekah have twins, named Esau and Jacob. Esau, as the firstborn son, had a special birthright in that culture, which included a double portion of the family inheritance. We’ll start the story in verse 24 of Genesis 25, at Esau and Jacob’s birth. **(24-34)**

²⁴ When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵ The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

²⁷ The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. ²⁸ Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰ He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom.)

³¹ Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.” ³² “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?” ³³ But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

Pastor Kevin DeYoung observes that, “Esau was literally consumed by his appetites. He was a man defined by his desires and deceived by his desires, which is essential to keep in mind because our world often tells us... that to be your authentic self, you must [act on the things you desire].

[But] Esau, in this story, is actually depicted as an animal. You can see this more clearly in the Hebrew text. There’s a play on names with Edom who came out hairy and red, and that’s going to be the name of Esau, and it’s also the name of this stew. Esau says,

Ha'adom, ha'adom – red stuff, red stuff. He's a man who's absolutely hungry and is just letting out an animal sort of cry...

Esau [in this story] was not made nobler for satisfying all of his desires. He was [actually] made lower. He became like an animal. That's what the text wants us to see. "Red stuff! Red stuff!" He's like an animal... Esau has traded one identity for another. He had a better identity, as firstborn of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham, and could have been, should have been heir to the promises. But he gave that away... because he was enslaved to his desires."

Esau is not the only one for whom it is unwise to live however he wants. DeYoung notes how he's never met anybody who says, "I'm perfect", even by their own standards, let alone God's. We all know on some level that something's not right with us, and that we can't fix it ourselves, since we can't even consistently live up to our own standards.

In Christian faith, we describe this as the fall: that Adam and Eve sinned, taking charge of their life, no longer letting God rule, and we have all inherited their sin nature.

So DeYoung says the cultural message that, "whatever you feel, you should do, and whatever you think about yourself, you are, and whatever you believe is your identity [that's only a good message] if our instincts are never self-deceived and our desires are never self-centered and our dreams are never self-destructive. But... we've all sinned, and so we're not the people that we ought to be."³

This morning's cultural message, if it includes the idea of a God, wants a permissive God, Who doesn't want you to change, a God Who leaves us to our own devices. But the whole problem of sin is that left to our own devices, we make horrible masters.

"Live for yourself" weakens relationships and groups – So I also wonder if this morning's cultural message weakens relationships and society.

This morning's culture message says there's no universal truth, so it's encouraging a society where there's a lack of shared meaning, where we're all separate, choosing our own individual "truths" to live by while considering any authority suspect.

³ <https://kevindeyoung.org/conference/whatever-you-do-do-not-be-true-to-yourself-geneva-college-commencement-2022/>

And this cultural message also encourages a “live for yourself” mindset, to “live however you want...”

I’m glad we enjoy many freedoms in this country, but as Pastor Mark Sayers notes, for humans to flourish, we need more than individual freedom. Sayers talks about four metaphorical buckets, about how we need some freedom, but we also need some meaning in life, community with God and people, and safety.

Sayers notes that in the US, our freedom bucket is overflowing. If we let that freedom bucket overflow, saying, “No authority can speak to how I live, I’m going to live for me,” that kind of unlimited freedom leads to less meaning in life, and less community with people and God, which leads to more anxiety.⁴

Pastor Tim Keller describes the damage of this morning’s cultural message, saying, “It is well documented that under the conditions of the modern, individualistic self, social ties and institutions are eroding, marriage and family are weakening, society is fragmenting into warring factions, and economic inequality is growing.”⁵

This morning’s cultural message has contributed to polarization politically between left and right, and between poor and rich, and between religious and secular, there’s even now polarization within the left and within the right.

The more people focus on how all authority is suspect and how they can live however they want, thinking their rights and happiness are more important than any relationship or institution, the weaker our society becomes.

A well-functioning society requires cooperative, selfless behavior in all kinds of ways: at home, in friendships, in your neighborhood, with other neighborhoods, at school, in politics, in workplaces, in the military, online, here at church, and so on. And the more everyone thinks only about their own desires, the weaker our relationships, institutions, and society will be.

To illustrate the impact, Keller invites us to think of a romantic relationship. If both people approach a relationship with an attitude of “me first, my desires are most important” eventually the relationship will unravel.

⁴ I’ve heard Sayers make this point on his podcast, *Rebuilders*.

⁵ Keller, Tim, *Making Sense of God*, 132.

On the other hand, if one in the relationship always says, “you first” while the other always says, “me first”, then the relationship will be exploitative.

It’s only to the extent that both partners say to each other “you first” that there is potential for an amazing relationship. Though Jesus was God in the flesh, He still lived with a “you first” mentality, and He wants His followers to do the same.

Back in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, Jesus’ disciples were not living in His way. Jesus’ followers were living “me first.” James and John came asking Jesus for the positions of greatest honor in His kingdom. The other ten disciples heard about this and were indignant. The disciples “me first” mentality was weakening their community. So Jesus calls the twelve together, and in verse 42 of Mark 10, here’s what Jesus says: **(42b-45)**

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

So an over focus on living for myself is against the way of Jesus, and it works against the meaningful, mutual “you first” relationships that we all need to flourish.

Only Lord Jesus provides the renewal, freedom, and relationships we need – We’ve considered so far how this morning’s cultural message is self-defeating, not as humble as it first appears, fails to account for our harmful desires, and weakens relationships and society.

So let’s consider God’s better alternative to this cultural message. I once heard an interview with NT Wright, a key leader in the church in England. He noted that this desire to look inside our hearts and live however we want out of that is distinctly American, and not realistic about what’s inside us.

Wright says about his Western European brethren, “We are more world weary; we don’t think if we look into our hearts that we’ll find anything nearly as much fun as you Americans think you’ll find in yours.” Then Wright explains that what we need is a renewed heart, one with good desires, from which will flow good things. And we can’t renew our own hearts, we need Jesus to do that because of our sin.

One way to describe our sin is that each of us has substituted ourselves for God. We've all lived out this morning's cultural message, as if God does not have a right to tell us how to live. We've substituted ourselves for God, acting as if we're our own creator, with authority to live however we want, and it has led to the mess in our lives and all around us.

The good news of the gospel is that in loving response, Jesus has substituted Himself for you. Jesus put Himself where you and I deserve to be, on the cross taking our punishment for substituting ourselves for God.

As we saw in Mark 10, Jesus came to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus died for your sins, He substituted Himself for you, and then He rose from the dead, defeating sin and death. And everyone who comes to Jesus in faith receives forgiveness and welcome in God's family.

And you also receive the gifts of God's Spirit, His Word, and His people to help you to grow, to renew what's inside your heart. As we walk with Lord Jesus, letting Him be the authority, letting Him provide the messages that guide our lives through His Word, responding to the work of His Spirit, enjoying edifying relationships with other followers of Jesus, then we experience a much better freedom.

Not the freedom of this morning's cultural message, which is just a freedom from restrictions. That's a negative concept of freedom, one that doesn't work and is too thin to give your life to. Freedom is only really good if it enables you to be part of something good.

Jesus offers that kind of freedom. In Jesus, you're free to live in accordance with your design, in right relationship with God, being true to yourself, but not your old self. In Jesus, you're free to be true to you as a new creation, who is alive to Christ and led by the Holy Spirit, free to love God and your neighbors. And when you fail, in Jesus, you are also free to know God's love and forgiveness, no matter what.

In Jesus you're free to participate in God's mission of making disciples, working alongside God and His people. And you're free to have hope in any circumstance, knowing that one day, in glory, you will have complete freedom from sin, pain, and death. On that day, Jesus will renew your heart so completely that you'll be free to truly live however you want while always being a blessing to others.

In Jesus, as we look forward to that day, we are free to belong and to practice these mutual, loving “you first” relationships here in the church. And not only in the church, in Jesus, you are free to love everyone, including those who think you’re a bad guy for suggesting it’s not good for everyone to live however they want.

As Pastor Tim Keller asks, what kind of truth keeps someone from scorning people who disagree? And what kind of truth gives you the power to love and move towards everyone? Keller answers, “If I build my identity on what Jesus Christ did for me and the fact that I have an everlasting name in him by grace, I can’t, on the one hand, feel superior to anybody, nor do I have to fear anybody else.

I don’t have to compare myself with them at all. My identity is based on somebody who was excluded for me, who was cast out for me, who loved his enemies, and that is going to turn me into someone who embraces the Different. Christians, of course, so often fail to realize and live out of the resources they have. But the world needs millions of people who have the capacity to do what the Gospel compels and empowers them to do.”⁶

Next Step

Last Sunday and this morning we’ve evaluated two messages common in our culture, seeing the problems with those messages while discovering God’s better message.

Whatever culture one lives in, there’s always some disagreement between that culture’s messages and God’s messages.

So as Pastor Mark Sayers describes it, maybe you find yourself this morning having your feet standing on two islands that are moving apart. On the one hand, you believe in Jesus, and you want to follow Him. But on the other hand, you’re also shaped by these cultural messages.

You embrace to some degree that “Life is found in looking inside, being true to yourself, and doing what makes you happy.” So perhaps, like me, you sometimes do what you think will make you happy, even when God’s Word clearly says it’s wrong. And perhaps, like me, you expect God to provide things in this life that He hasn’t promised to provide, expecting God to prioritize your happiness as you define it.

⁶ Keller, Tim, *Making Sense of God*, 151.

Maybe you also embrace to some degree that “no one has a right to tell anyone how to live, so live however you want as long as you’re not harming others.” Perhaps you think, despite what the Bible says, that Christians shouldn’t share their faith. Or perhaps you think that you ought to define by yourself, apart from God’s Word, things like gender norms and which kinds of people are free to sleep together. (We’ll talk more about that in a few weeks.)

So Sayers notes that a big part of being a Christian today in the west is taking yourself off the throne. To no longer have your feet standing on these two islands that are moving apart; no longer one foot standing with Jesus and one foot standing with these cultural messages.

So our next step this morning is to live with Jesus on the throne. That’s how we can apply this sermon to our lives. As a Christian, live with Jesus on the throne.

On the cross, Jesus pays an incredible price to bring about His desired, perfect world. We don’t deserve to be in that perfect renewed world, because of our sin. But through an act of grace, on the cross Jesus creates a space for us to be in the world that He’s creating. Only God can bring about a perfect world, and do it with mercy, inviting us to be part of it through Jesus.⁷

As we look forward to that perfect world, let’s live today with Jesus on the throne. Let’s be so devoted to Jesus that we reject any cultural message, no matter how popular, if it goes against Jesus’ message. Let’s pray for help with that...

Dismissal – You’re dismissed to live with Jesus on the throne.

⁷ I’ve heard Sayers express these ideas on his podcast, *Rebuilders*.