



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

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Fame and Fortune

1 Peter 2:2-10; Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34

Most of us in this room are mature enough to remember a time when one had to *do* something in order to be famous. Way back in the good ol' days, people made a name for themselves by accomplishing something notable like breaking a record for strike outs or rushing yards, because they were an Olympian or Nobel Prize winner, because they had written the great American novel, delivered an Oscar-worthy performance, recorded a chart-topping hit, or been elected to public office. Of course there are always a few household names that are more infamous than famous, like people who made the news for spying or criminal activity, but for the most part, fame was the reward for exceptional talent or achievement.

But just a couple of years before our high school graduates were born, something changed: Technology became available to the public which allowed us to share videos via the internet. If you can believe what you read on the internet, long before video sharing websites and social media were popular, the first video went viral somewhere around 1995, when tens of millions of people began to email a church-inappropriate South Park video clip called "The Spirit of Christmas." A year later the dancing baby of Ally McBeal fame appeared in inboxes all over the world, and a communications phenomenon was born.

It didn't take long before people were sharing not only professionally produced clips and clever commercial spots, but also home videos. A decade later, Myspace, YouTube, and Facebook made it possible for us to share every moment of our lives with the world within seconds of its occurrence and for hundreds of millions of people to view the pictures and videos instantly. These websites became a platform for sharing information, for promoting causes, and for inspiring change but also for bullying and exploitation. And they became a means by which people could become famous almost instantly and for doing almost nothing. A quick Google search will reveal a list of over 1.3 million websites devoted to exploring the profound subject of people who are famous for being famous.

If you have any doubt about the social and psychological effects of the past twenty years of technological development, you need look no further than several recent studies of teenagers and pre-teens. Statistics are easy to manipulate and sometimes difficult to interpret, but what study after study seems to indicate is that increasingly, and in some cases overwhelmingly, young people are naming fame as their primary goal in life¹. Not money or success or respect or happiness or making a difference or power, but fame. Kids want to be famous, and it seems that they are willing to do almost anything, or nothing at all, to achieve their desire.

I realize at this point that I am beginning to sound like an old fuddy duddy. Although it may *seem* like it based on what I've just said, I am not at all lamenting the development of technology or questioning the benefits of it. Information sharing technology and even social media, in all their many forms, can be used to bring people together and to accomplish great good in our world. But they can also become instruments for distraction and deception, devices for abuse and misuse, even weapons for harming one another.

Our tendency to distort and misuse the good gifts of this life is certainly nothing new. We humans have a long history of getting our priorities out of order, of being captivated by accolades and applause and by fads and new toys, and we often misdirect our efforts and attention to the temporary and material so that our focus moves away from those things with eternal significance.

In the midst of his Sermon on the Mount, the longest single record of Jesus' teachings found in the New Testament, we read today's gospel lesson, a clear admonition about the distractions and worries of life which can so easily divert our attention from the priorities of God's Kingdom.

After telling the crowds gathered to hear him that they should not give their hearts to material treasures or allow the acquisition of wealth to control their lives, Jesus said, "Do not worry."

Do not worry? Jesus, how can we not worry? There are bills to be paid, utility rates are rising, and there are rumors of more layoffs.

Do not worry? Exams are just a couple of weeks away, my term paper is due, and my teachers keep piling on more and more assignments.

¹ See studies reported on <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/18/social-media-kids>; <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/366>; and <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201304/is-gen-y-becoming-the-new-lost-generation>

Do not worry? My schedule is so over booked I can't possibly get everything done. I have three places to be at once this afternoon, my house is a wreck, I'm behind at work, and I don't know when I will ever find time to rest.

Do not worry? Our world seems to be falling apart. Violence and tension erupt around every corner, bad news fills the airways, financial markets are volatile, poverty is rampant, and resources are stretched thin.

Do not worry? Jesus, really? How can we not worry?

In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis offers a satire in the form of letters written from one of the managers in Satan's army to a demon apprentice named Wormwood. Most of the letters offer advice from the ranking demon about how the novice can entice and entrap the humans assigned to him, and a great many of them involve various forms of causing the patients (that would be us humans) great worry and anxiety in order to deflect our attention from more important things. In one of the more direct passages, Screwtape writes, "[God] wants men to be concerned with what they do; our business is to keep them worrying about what will happen to them."²

Here, as is so often the case throughout the book, Screwtape, who sees God as the Enemy, ironically echoes the teachings of Jesus: God wants us to think about what we do with our lives and not be worried about our lives because it is when we stop worrying about things we should trust God to provide and things we can't control that we can truly begin to focus on the work of God's Kingdom. Jesus' teaching is not that material things are bad or that our physical needs are inconsequential. Instead, Jesus urges us to trust in God's provision and care and to redirect our focus on doing the work to which he has called us.

I do not believe, as some might conclude, that Jesus is out of touch with or unconcerned about the needs and realities of our lives or that not worrying about the things of this world means we are to withdraw from it. In fact, I think it is just the opposite. From Jesus' first sermon in his hometown synagogue (Luke 4:7), throughout his parables and his miracles of feeding and healing, and until his last resurrection appearances to his disciples (John 21), Jesus shows compassion for the needs of those he encounters and both demonstrates and instructs that we are to be involved in the world which God created and for which Christ gave his life. When we stop worrying and fretting

²C. S. Lewis. *The Screwtape Letters*. Geoffrey Bles Publishing: London. 1942.

about everything around us, we are freed to become more fully and effectively engaged in ministering to the needs we encounter and to work to bring about the fulfillment of God's Kingdom in our world.

The idea that Christians are to live with "the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other" has been attributed to Karl Barth, though no source I could find could verify the origin of the quote. Whoever first said it, the concept that we are to be grounded in the teachings of Scripture while remaining immersed in the events and issues which affect our world is vital to the living out of our faith in a way that seeks and lives the Kingdom of God. Perhaps a reinterpretation of this notion for our time, reflected in the offertory items presented earlier in the service, would be for us to approach life with a Bible in one hand and a mobile device in the other, unnecessary, of course, if you have already downloaded a Bible app to your smartphone or tablet.

The challenge for us, as people of faith, as it is for every generation, is to remain relevant and engaged in our culture without falling into its traps. We may feel inadequate for the task, but as we were reminded in the First Letter of Peter, with Christ as the cornerstone on which our faith is built, we have become "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." We have been shown great mercy and equipped for the work to which we have been called.

So that you won't be left in despair about the surveys I cited earlier, one of the bright notes discovered by researchers³ is that young people who participate in religious activities are more likely to be informed about events and issues in their communities and around the world as well as more likely to be involved in working to make a difference by raising money for causes they believe in and by serving others. And they are not just more likely than their non-religious peers but also more likely than any previous generation. I suspect their access to technology may have something to do with this good news, too.

As in every time and place, this generation of young believers is called to reinterpret its faith for our time, to be a prophetic voice calling the Church back to the teachings of Christ but also leading it forward to meet the challenges and opportunities of today with ingenuity and inspiration, with courage and creativity and compassion.

Today we prepare to send some of our young people out into the world, praying not only that you find fame and fortune, but even more that you find

³<http://www.youthandreligion.org/resources/surveys.html>

your place of service to God's Kingdom. You will receive praise for your hard work, applause for your many gifts and talents, and accolades for all that you have accomplished, and you should. But I pray that you will also trust in God's provision and care, that your lives will reflect the strength of the heritage of faith out of which you have grown, and that you will hear the voice of Christ in the work that you do and the path that you follow.

Those of us who are parents or grandparents, ministers or Sunday School teachers, mentors or friends have encouraged you to, or in some cases made you, come to this place week after week because we believe that here, among this community of believers, you can hear the voice of God, learn to reflect the image of Christ, and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We have encouraged you to make prayer and Bible study, worship and service, compassion and justice integral parts of your life because they are a secure cornerstone on which to build your life of faith and will light your path to Christ.

So go with the assurance that you are surrounded by the prayers of these people and empowered by the Holy Spirit as you discern God's call for your life. Go in the hope that wherever the journey of life takes you and whatever you do with the days you are given, you are nurtured by God's love and sustained by God's grace. Go with the blessings of this family of faith to claim your place among the royal priesthood, the holy nation of God's own people. Go with our prayers and our blessings, not to find treasure or fame or to worry about tomorrow, but seeking God's Kingdom and trusting God's promise to provide all that you need for the journey. Amen.

Not only do we continue to celebrate the resurrection of our Savior, O God, but we celebrate our own resurrection to new life. On this gloriously beautiful weekend, when all of nature sings your glory and paints your praise in bold color throughout the earth, we add our own thanksgiving to the chorus. We are your people. You claim us and redeem us and love us to life that is full and complete. For that gift we are indeed grateful.

Thank you for the ways you have enriched our lives: for family to love and to love us, for friends who support us and enrich our lives, and for this magnificent world in which we discover ourselves and your endless wonders.

We thank you for these young people who are gifted beyond measure and add such richness to our family of faith. We pray for them and their families that they might discover your calling and walk faithfully into every opportunity life offers them. Bless each one who is graduating and beginning a new journey in life. Bless them each day with awareness of your presence and gift them with an eagerness to learn and grow no matter where their path takes them. Bless with a sense of fulfillment and peace those who love and care for them most.

Just as the brilliant sunshine of any day may easily give way to clouds and thunderstorms, we know, too, that life takes quick and dangerous turns. So we pray your safekeeping upon these young people and for all whose needs are heavy upon our hearts. Provide for them and for us all exactly what we need for health and wholeness and peace.

It has been a sad weekend in our community, O God, and we grieve with our brothers and sisters whose lives have been pierced with tragedy. Comfort and sustain them, we pray. Walk with them day by day through the heartbreak that is theirs. Bring us together as a community to love and care for one another.

We pray as well for our world. You have given us such a great gift, O God, yet strife and tragedy threaten to scar our world with pain and hatred. You have created us to be better than that, O God, you have called us to be stones of mercy, enlivened to create a new kingdom of love within the world. Help us with all of our needs, O God, for in all things our faith looks to you, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Lord. Amen.

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