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What I Learned Over Summer Vacation

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Matthew 5:11-16 (NIV)

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

If you are new to our church here since last summer, you should know this is something I’ve done every year, like when you came back to school in the fall and the teacher asked you to write a paper on your summer break. That’s what this is: my report on “What I Learned Over Summer Vacation.”

Our family actually had two times away this summer.

The first was six days just outside Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Someone in the church here very generously gave us a week of their timeshare that they were not going to use, so we happily went to the Massanutten Resort, leaving on a Friday and returning home the following Thursday.

That was a few weeks ago.

Then over this past weekend – with many thanks to Ed and Dean for filling in so well, Annette and I traveled with our son, David, and several of his friends from our church here (Levi Branan, Chris Bauer, Isaac Madill, Nick Riffell, Colin Winter, and Chase Padgett) and a couple of their parents to Blaine, Minnesota to compete in the USA Ultimate Frisbee National Championships.

Their team took second in their division by the way – so that was lots of fun.

That was a quick trip. We left early Friday morning and got home Tuesday afternoon.

Those were our summer vacations.

So, what did I learn?

Well, I learned a few things related to age this summer, like:

The older you get, the faster summer seems to go.

The older you get, the harder it is to drive 12 hours straight.

The older you get, the more you prefer your own mattress and pillow.

After standing in the sun for a couple days watching ultimate games, I learned that the inside of your ear can get sunburned, and that it’s really annoying when that sunburn peels.

Also, on this last trip, I learned that neither simply going the speed of all the traffic around you nor driving a nondescript, gray minivan will prevent you from getting a speeding ticket in Wisconsin.

I will say that after you’ve been driving a while in the evening and you’re getting a little sleepy, nothing wakes you up quite as effectively as seeing blue lights in your rearview mirror!

That state policeman was very nice, though, and realizing the risks that officers take these days in just approaching a car, we made sure we were very nice back to him.

Though we weren’t nice enough to avoid the ticket.

He asked why we were in Wisconsin and when we told him about the Frisbee tournament, he laughed and said, “All of you must be in a big hurry to get home. You’re the second team I’ve pulled over.”

Ours was the better team though. He told us the other team he ticketed finished 15th.

So, I learned a few things in all of that.

Weeks ago, on our way home from Harrisonburg, I learned a bit more about the extent to which our society has changed over the past 50 years by touring the bunker beneath the Greenbriar Resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

Conception and construction began during the Eisenhower administration and was completed in 1962. This was to be the living and working quarters for congress in case of a nuclear attack on Washington. For over 30 years it was maintained in a ready state and was kept a secret, until some reporter wrote about it in *The Washington Post* in the early 90s.

Our tour guide pointed out that, in those days – before social media and when people still had a healthy respect for truly important information, a secret like that could be kept – by a whole community – even by all the people who built it. They kept the secret because they recognized that it was for the common good.

That reminded me of how the media never photographed or talked about the fact that Franklin Roosevelt essentially couldn’t walk because of polio. He asked them not to do so, for the good of the nation, and by and large they didn’t.

Back then, even the media were willing to give up their own potential fame for the sake of the good of the whole.

Our tour guide commented on how that sort of discretion would never happen today. People too quickly say what they know – and often what they don’t know – if it will work in some way to their advantage – if it will bring them notoriety or wealth.

And she’s right. As a nation, we’ve become, in a relatively short time, a far more self-serving people. This

is, of course, just one of the consequences of our rejection of God. Because if God is not part of our personal and national fabric, your see, our first priority becomes our own personal advancement and benefit.

It's the sin of Eden, you see?

"Whatever benefits me personally: that's what I'll do."

Apart from Jesus – apart from redemption, that's where we are, broadly, as a nation.

Followers of Jesus, though, are to think and live differently than that.

It's sad to say it, but another "the older I get" observation is that, the older I get, the more common it is to just reflexively presume that whatever the national sentiment seems to be about a thing or person or topic, the Christian sentiment is going to be the precise opposite.

More and more often, unfortunately, followers of Christ are safe in presuming that the Christian way is going to be the opposite of what the world around us is doing.

That was not always the case in our nation, of course. And it's not absolutely the case even today. But more and more, it's becoming the norm.

Our culture reveals secrets, you see, whenever it can. But Christians should keep them, should keep confidences.

Our culture seeks its own individual good. Christians seek the good of others.

Our culture prioritizes the needs of the rich and successful. Christians prioritize the needs of the poor and marginalized.

Our culture prizes personal safety. Christians prize the will of God, no matter what that may bring to us, personally.

And on and on.

It hasn't always been this way, at least not as much as it has become in our day today. And those of us who are old enough to remember those days when our national mores were, on the whole, more "Christian" can find it particularly hard to believe or face today's realities.

But that doesn't change today's realities.

No one wants it to be this way, which is why we work and pray for an awakening—a great, spiritual awakening—in our nation.

But, if there is any benefit to the way things are now, the benefit is this: lights always shine brighter in darker places.

The darker the place, the brighter the light. And the brighter the light: the more *obvious* it is, the more *helpful* it is, the more *provocative* and *attractive* it can be, the more *potential benefit* exists, and the more *dramatic* the *possibility* of *transformation*.

The fact is, our American post-Christian culture is much like the pre-Christian culture in which Jesus and those earliest believers lived, so when we read the New Testament and what those Christ-followers dealt with and how they handled life, we can identify with them and their culture much more readily than we might imagine.

The passage that was read for us this morning, for example, is just as true in our day as it was in Jesus' day.

We are blessed, Jesus says there in verse 11, when, because of Him, people insult us and persecute us and say all sorts of false evil against us.

Our self-protective, first thought is to do whatever is necessary to avoid our culture's insults and persecution.

But Jesus says, "No, we're blessed when those things come our way."

Now, it's not as if we want our culture to act this way. God doesn't want this world to be against Him, and so, again, we pray and work such that our culture would be different—that our culture would be godly.

But as it is—and as it affects us, personally, those insults and lies that are said about us as followers of Jesus are nothing to be avoided or mourned or complained about.

We don't go out looking for them.

But at the same time, we can rest assured that God will sort all that out in our lives, just as He did in the lives of those earliest believers.

God will bring good to us in spite of people around us thinking us crazy or unsophisticated or unenlightened for following Jesus.

And we know that's true because He's done it before.

Most of the Greek and Roman cultures of the first century thought the very same about Christ followers back then, you see?

That's why Jesus says to them—assures them—here, "*Blessed are you when you experience hard things—when you're attacked personally because of me.*"

Even if the whole culture rises up against us, as it did time and again against those earliest believers, it will be OK, because being on the side of Jesus puts us on the side of right and truth.

Being on the side of Jesus puts us on the side of *light*; that's how Jesus put it.

To the unsaved world, that sounds so arrogant.

But with neither hesitation nor shame, in John 8, Jesus said very plainly, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*"

He is the *light* of the world. *His way is the way to live* and to *think* and to *understand* how this world works.

All the blessings and benefits of light, and much, much more, are, ultimately, wrapped up in Jesus, so if we ever want to find true life and success and goodness, we simply have to look to Him.

That's hard for our culture to hear, and even affirming that will bring insult and persecution today, just as Jesus predicted.

But affirm it we must, because Jesus also said there in Matthew 5, "*You are—we are—His followers are—the light of the world.*" As we are in Him and He is in us, we display His light. We are the conduits of His light to those around us.

We who listen to Jesus—who know Him and follow Him—we are the carriers and displayers of truth and love

and justice and all things of God – all things good – to our world.

That's who Christians are – who we're to be.

We are the influence of God: we reveal not our own light but God's light – in this darkness.

Kind of like this [hold up cable]. This is a piece fiber optic cable. It produces no light of its own, but if light is shined into it here, it carries the light and displays it out here.

Just like that, followers of Jesus carry God's light to the darkness. God wants this to happen, so our darkened world might be able to know Him and find Him, and in Him find His way and His path – the good path, the path that makes life here work the way He made it to work.

We are the lamps that line the walk, so people can know where it's safe to step.

We are the streetlights that line the roads, so people can know where it is safe to drive.

We are the lighthouses that line the coasts, so people know where it is safe to sail.

That's who Christians are and what we're to do, because the world desperately needs God's light.

You know, when you live and work day after day in the Bible Belt of our nation – and in Wilmore in particular, it can be a little easier to forget how dark the world really is. Because although there is darkness here, certainly there is also an unusually bright amount of light.

That's why people like visiting and even living in Wilmore: whether they know it or not, they enjoy the divine light that shines here.

That's also why the Christians of Wilmore need to leave every once in a while: to remind ourselves that there is lots of darkness in our culture – in our world.

There is a tremendous need for followers of Jesus to be the light Jesus says we are.

That's what I learn – and re-learn every summer: the world's desperate need for light, and Jesus' call for me to be that light.

For you to be that light.

For us, together, to be the light the world needs.

It was so evident so often to me in Minnesota how different the Christian kids on our team were from the other teams:

in their language,

their behavior,

their honesty,

their humility,

their helpfulness,

their sportsmanship,

in the way they reached out in kindness to people very different from them.

Light in a dark world.

That's who we are.

Jesus said, *"I am (and in me, then, you are – we are) the light of the world.*

A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl. No, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Lord, help us to realize how dark the darkness is, and then to faithfully and unashamedly yet lovingly carry your light.

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Song for the Nations*

Benediction