

What DOES God Want?

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Matt. 5:1-12

Micah 6:6-8

I have a confession to make. Before participating in communion, many churches require that Christians first confess their sins. Thank goodness that here at Wedgewood Baptist, confession is NOT required, though you will notice that I have included a unison prayer of confession as part of our worship this morning.

But I digress. Here's my confession: I have a love/hate relationship with Dr. Laura. That's right, THE Dr. Laura of talk radio, a short-lived television show, countless self-help books, website product sales AND her 16 year old kid's mom! Whew! She wears me out just listing this much of her bio. Dr. Laura and I are the same age and if I had half the energy she purports to have, my house would be spotless, my clothes would be pressed, I'd work 60 hours a week (since my kids are grown of course) and wear a size 8!

But I digress again. On the eight-to-fifteen minute drive from home to work each morning, I desert my public radio station to catch a few minutes of her program. Maybe I love tuning in to Dr. Laura because I want to hear what other people consider to be relational problems in this 21st century. Maybe it's because I want to see how Dr. Laura responds to a distraught caller so that I can disagree and feel wiser than she is. Maybe it's because – in the safety of my car where no one can hear me – I can shriek at someone who makes arbitrary statements about what's morally right – as though she were the final authority!

What Dr. Laura espouses can be summed up in two sentences. First sentence: THE ANSWERS TO LIFE'S CHALLENGES ARE SIMPLE. Second: JUST FOLLOW MY RULES AND YOU'LL BE RIGHT. Dr. Laura ends each program by saying, "Now go do the right thing!" In other words, "I've told you how to handle your life this morning. Now go follow my advice and you'll be right!" Sure, she bases her opinions on Hebrew scriptures – her interpretation of them. But what I shriek at in the confines of my car is that no interpretation but hers is morally correct. SHE has THE ONLY RIGHT answer for every dilemma. So by her way of looking at the world, the question "What DOES God Want?" can be answered simply by thumbing through our Bibles until we find just the scripture that fits every situation. And, if we do what's right, we'll get a reward.

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Lots of us Christians live our lives that way. We expect to find every answer to our questions in the Bible or from the words of a pastor – who MUST BE an expert in knowing the right way to live. In fact, I believe that the reason so many new mega-churches are popping up all over our region, is because Christians want their ministers – the biblical experts, to give answers that don't need to be thought about. All of life is either right or wrong. Either Christian or evil. No middle ground – no ambiguity. No amazing greys or (amazing grace) as I like to call all the in-between options from which we must choose daily.

I first learned about amazing grace as a young adult when my pastor helped me discover that all life's questions were not meant to be simplified into "this is right and that is wrong." Trying to make everything fit into categories of "good or bad" "right or wrong" leaves no room for us to grow in our understanding of how God works in the world. For instance, if we decide that marriage is good and divorce is bad, where in the community of faith do we make room for people who are divorced? As second-class citizens? In truth, many of life's most difficult decisions have to do with choosing between what is good and what is best in a given situation, or choosing the best of several lousy options. It is at these times that God calls us to use our own gifts of discernment to discover what it might be that God wants us to do. A few years later, I learned a lot more about the beauty of AMAZING GREYS when I began to live fully despite the loss of my own marriage, as I responded to God's call to ordained ministry.

Part of what makes us Baptists unique is our belief that God has given us minds to help us find answers to tough questions. The Baptist term is "soul freedom" or "soul liberty" which means that the right answer for one of us might not be the right answer for another person. But we Baptists historically have believed that God wants us to use our minds to determine what is right for us in our relationship with God in any given situation. We do indeed look to the Bible for guidance. But we need to remember that looking for an answer in the Bible can be like looking up directions online using Mapquest. Mapquest is great for getting the large picture. But, when it comes down to the fine points, you may want to call somebody who actually has been there! Sometimes finding the best road map for our life's journey means listening quietly for wisdom, being willing to look within for God's voice. Sometimes finding the best solution requires waiting. Sometimes finding the right answer requires action.

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What, then, can we say about all these biblical "rules" for living that are part of today's scriptures? Last week I read a reflection from the Urban Ministry Center on the Beatitudes – the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12) – that gave me a new meaning for those familiar blessings. The writer commented that because these blessings come at the beginning of the sermon on the Mount, they show us that God's favor – God's blessing – comes before any of our actions. Instead of these blessings being granted as a reward for choosing the right behavior, God names all the kinds of people who are blessed because we exist.

The reflection went on to say that in ancient times a man who fulfilled the values of the society was blessed. If he had a loving wife, obedient children, prosperity and a long life, he was seen to be blessed by God. Does that sound familiar? Haven't we all heard people say about a wealthy person, "God has blessed her with so much?" But Jesus turned this kind of blessing given by society upside down. Jesus said in the beatitudes that God's blessing is given to everyone – everyone whom conventional society has overlooked as unimportant. God blesses the poor in spirit, the meek, the mourners, the merciful, those hungering for justice. God blesses the pure in heart, the makers of peace, those mistreated for the cause of justice. It is on these people that Jesus pronounces God's blessing. God blesses people who are jobless, homeless, who are separated from their families, who are broken because of addictions and other illness. God blesses people who are usually left outside the doors of the church. It is to these people – to us – that the Good News of God's grace comes.

And because of God's blessing, because of God's extravagant grace freely given, we can then become God's instruments of blessing for others. We share God's grace and God's blessings with others – not because we expect a reward if we do – not because we expect punishment if we don't. We become God's hands and feet in blessing others because it is our joyous response to all we have received from God.

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What then, DOES God want us to do? With all my heart I believe that God wants us to live sufficiently from the blessing God has given us. Instead of seeing all that we MAY NOT have – by society's standards – and struggling to earn more and more income, no matter what the cost to our spirits – God calls us to bless others in the same way we have been blessed. God wants us to be accepting, to share, to be kind, to love one another and to love ourselves, and to walk humbly as we bless others. God wants us to open ourselves to what surrounds us and to use our heads and hearts to discover how we best can share God's blessing with others.

So as we prepare ourselves today to receive the symbols of God's blessing that are set before us: the bread of life and the cup of the new covenant, we come to God confessing that we have not always lived as though we were blessed. We have not always given God's blessing freely to others. Before we share this meal today, we ask forgiveness from God by reading together the prayer of confession printed in the bulletin.

Prayer of Confession

We confess that our own concerns have taken priority over the needs of our brothers and sisters. Our comforts have seemed more important than others' poverty. Our difficulties have seemed more significant than the tragedies of others. We confess that we have forgotten that we are created in your image. We have insulted you by treating ourselves with contempt. We have distorted our beauty with sin. Forgive us. Mend us. Redirect us to love others, to love ourselves and to walk humbly in your ways, our Creator and God. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear, then, these words of assurance: It is not to earn God's grace that we act justly; it is because God's great mercy shown in the self-giving of Jesus frees us to be grace-filled. Filled, then, with gratitude, it becomes impossible for us knowingly to cause God or others pain. The experience of being forgiven makes our heart more like God's – more loving toward others.

ALL: THANKS BE TO GOD!