

**Jesus’ Cultural Awareness Briefing**

**February 5, 2017**

**Matthew 5:13-20**

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from one who brought God’s World to our world, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

American travelers to foreign countries have often been called “Ugly Americans.” The term refers to American tourists’ tendencies to be loud, and obnoxious, and to believe that everyone understands English if you speak loud enough and slow enough. We tend to show their arrogance and earn our name as an ugly American when we fail to understand the local culture and expect everyone, everywhere lives and acts like we do, because of course the American way is far superior to the other lesser cultures around the globe…

The fact is, different countries have difficult customs and it is important to know those customs before you travel to that country if you want to avoid earning the that nickname. I’ve never been to Japan, but I know that one bows instead of shaking hands, I’ve heard that if you give or receive a business card, you do it with two hands, and you never blow your nose in public—especially with a handkerchief. I do have some personal experience in travel to the middle east. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia public displays of affection are considered obscene, while it is acceptable to walk hand in hand members of the same sex. You never offer your left hand to greet another person either. In the middle east that’s considered a great offense because the left hand is considered unclean. When I was deployed to Egypt back in 1988 we stayed in the Marriott Hotel in Cairo for a few days at the very beginning and the end of the exercise. We would be bussed out to the base we were building in the middle of the desert for the day and back to the hotel in the evening. I’ll never forget my first meal at the hotel restaurant. It took me quite a while to figure out why out table wasn’t being waited on. I was sitting with my legs crossed. This exposed the bottom of my foot, which is a serious offense to those around you. In the middle east, a person never exposes the bottom of their feet. As soon as I uncrossed my legs the waiter came right up to our table. Another thing you never do over there is give the thumbs up sign. That is considered an offense as well and the Okay sign is the sign of the evil eye and is considered to be like putting a curse on the person you make the gesture to. It’s so important to understand these cultural differences that when the Air Force deploys a person, they require everyone to attend cultural awareness classes before you depart. I guess I must have slept through the not showing the bottom of the feet thing…

As Christians, we live in a different country. It’s called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. If you remember last week, I called it God’s World. These readings from the 5th chapter of Matthew are Jesus’ way of providing us our very own “Cultural Awareness” class on the differences between the secular or non-religious world and God’s World. In these lessons, Jesus explains to His followers’ cultural norms of this New Kingdom he has come to bring into the world. When Jesus sits down and teaches, he is instructing the people in what life in His Kingdom is like.

In the very first sermon Jesus preached his first public proclamation message was, “Repent and believe for the kingdom of God is at hand.” The word that has been translated, “is at hand,” can also be translated, “has arrived.” In Jesus Christ God’s World has come crashing and clashing into the world of popular culture of the day—their day and our day as well…

The early church anticipated Jesus immanent return, but they also realized Jesus had brought in something new. They had been born from above according the Gospel of John. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that we have died with Christ at our baptism, so that as he rose from the dead we to might experience new life. When we come out of the water on the other side of our Baptism that new life we’re given is no longer of this world. It’s lived in God’s World, in the Kingdom of God, the very same Kingdom Jesus began when he first proclaimed to everyone who had ears to hear, the message of repentance and living by God’s rule—a reign best characterized as one of radical grace and mercy.

The Israelites experienced a new life when they escaped from slavery in Egypt to the promise of a new life in the Promised Land. When this was taking place, Moses climbed Mount Sinai and came back down with the Ten Commandments. In the New Testament Jesus as the new Moses and so much more. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes up a mountain, sits down and gives the people a new set of commandments—guidelines for life in God’s Kingdom.

You might ask where this kingdom of heaven is on earth. I actually believe it’s the community of Jesus’ followers—the Church… I know this is laughable for many people. The church, at times, has not acted in any way like the Kingdom of God Jesus describes. Church fights and behind the scene politics do not reflect the love, grace and mercy of God’s World. People gossip and as they repeat stories they’ve heard they sometimes destroy their fellow brother or sister’s reputation in the process.

I’ve been receiving Occupational Therapy for tendonitis in my left elbow for a couple of weeks. In conversation with the airman who is treating me with ultrasound and message, our talk eventually turned to his involvement with the Church. He told me he was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition and even attended Catholic school all the way through High School. I’m just starting my therapy sessions so he hasn’t confided exactly what happened, but he indicated something did, and it turned him away from the Church. Sometimes churches can be harsh places of judgment and pain.

On the other hand, the church has everything it needs to be the Kingdom of God on earth. We have God’s greatest treasures--the love of God and God’s forgiveness. We are the ones who know first-hand the joy of God’s mercy. We’ve all experienced the comfort of others in our times of grief. We are the recipients of God’s Good News every time we gather in His Name. The problem appears to be that people really don’t take this perspective of the church seriously. Sometimes the Church doesn’t shine very pure light and we’ve lost our saltiness My therapy technician reminded me just how human the church is. The church is also God’s presence in the world and one of the ways that God moves to touch the lives of others. My prayer is that over the coming weeks I’ll be able to remind my new friend of that side of the Church.

There is a certain outlandishness to life in God’s World. You are the salt of the earth is a pretty outlandish claim. You are the most basic foundation that brings flavor and preservation and goodness to the world. You are the light of the world and we are told to let our light shine for all to see. If we follow this teaching of Jesus we don’t give gifts in secret or anonymously, we do them for all to see how good our God is and to give Him Honor and praise. When the way we live, every day, reflects God’s values, that’s when we’re honoring God. Make no mistake about it, people will see the way you live your life. The question Jesus raises for us today is, will you bring honor or dishonor to God? In our failure to live up to every letter and every stroke of the letter of the law, we bring dishonor to God, because we are His Children. The good news is that even as we bring dishonor to God by our actions, at the same time receiving God’s grace and forgiveness brings even greater honor because it displays the great mercy and love God has for each and every one of us. While we are still stuck in the mire of our sin, God gives us His own Son to lift us from that endless downward spiral.

God’s kingdom has come. In the hearing of these words from Jesus you have now received your Cultural Awareness Briefing on the values God’s people hold when we live under God’s rule in His Kingdom. May we redouble our efforts to live as God’s Children and not as the ugly American in God’s World. Even though we can never attain the level of perfection God demands, may we be thankful and appreciative of the mercy God offers and willingly receive His grace with joy and reflect that joy so that Our God and Father will receive Honor because of all He has done, for you. Amen.