

Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational
1055 Williams Street
Pittsfield, MA 01201

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Merry Christmas!

May your Christmas be blessed and centered on Christ!





From the Pastor's Desk

Therefore rid yourselves of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, how that you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, the living stone,...you also like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sac-

As I write this, we are gearing up to celebrate Christmas. It's such a busy time of year. A week later we will begin a new year. All of a sudden, our attention shifts to where we want to go in the coming year.

Christmas is, of course, about the incarnation. God took on human flesh and condescended to live with us. John captures it well in his prologue; *The Word became flesh and tabernacle with us, and we have seen his glory...* (John 1:14)

The word "tabernacle" comes from the Hebrew word which means "to dwell, or live"(make his residence with us). The inference is that the tabernacle of old represented God's dwelling place in the midst of his people as they were camped at the base of Mt. Sinai and as they made their way to the promised land. God's presence was manifested in the glory cloud which settled over the tabernacle. It was the same cloud which led them through the wilderness. After they had entered the promised land the tent-like tabernacle was put aside and the Temple, made of stone, took its place, to be a permanent building for God in Jerusalem. The same glory cloud took up residence there once it was complete. With Christ, the presence of God was with us in bodily form in the person of God's Son. What powerful imagery!

Now Peter, when addressing this fledgling church, reminds them that they are being built into a spiritual tabernacle or temple. That is, the church becomes the incarnate presence of God in the world.

OK, how is God's presence manifested? For one thing, by our demeanor. We are not cinder blocks. We are not chunks of granite or marble. We are "living stones"—people in whom the Spirit lives. But the fact that we are built into a house (temple) means that we are in relationship to one another. Each stone is placed in a certain position to support the ones next to it, and to contribute structure and strength to the whole. It is within the context of these relationships that we offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God. And it is within the context of these relationships that we truly incarnate the presence of Christ in the world.

Relationships are never easy though, are they? There is always potential for friction and tension. This is what Paul addresses particularly in 1 Corinthians and what James addresses in his letter. And this is why Peter precedes his words about us being built into a spiritual house with the admonition to rid ourselves of things such as malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. It is these things that are deadly to real Christian relationships. That's why, when we find that another living stone rubs us the wrong way, we can never say, "That's it, I'm out of here." It leaves a gap in the structure and weakens the building. And it short-circuits God intention to use us as an incarnational presence in the world.

As we contemplate the incarnation of Christ this year, may we also be reminded that we as Grace Church are also the incarnational presence of God in Pittsfield. As we begin a new year, may we resolve to rid ourselves of those things that hinder our worship and testimony.

Pastor Tom Bridgman



Brazil or Bust

by Ian Bridgman

“Man”, said my friend, “of all the options you have, it seems like you’re taking the most challenging one.” He was probably right. He had spent the better part of the past 4 years in Lima, Peru, and I had finally followed him down to check out the “Lima Life” for myself. After two months in Peru’s capital, I was having a great time, but I had decided that my heart was really in Brazil, the country that had captured my attention ever since my first visit during the 2014 World Cup. My challenge was this: to touch down in Brazil, choose a city, pick a neighborhood, find a church, and find enough work, teaching English or otherwise, to break even and not starve, all before my bank account ran out. Adventurous? Yes. Unrealistic? By globe-trotter standards, not necessarily.

I had every reason to stay in Peru. I had friends who knew the lay of the land, and job offers were plentiful. There was a whole assortment of teaching positions to consider, and I had even wound up as the lead role in a TV commercial for Peruvian White Asparagus. It was a long way from Hollywood, but that one hour with a camera in my face had paid well, and brought potential for even more opportunities. Meanwhile, the word coming out of Brazil was that with its economy in shambles, teaching jobs were drying up. As for my new found acting career, I knew that promoting odd-colored veggies would never get me onto the hyper competitive runways of Brazilian high fashion. To make it harder, I had chosen Rio de Janeiro as my city. Rio was big, busy, expensive, and violent, and almost every one of its 11 million inhabitants was a perfect stranger. I had friends in other Brazilian cities. In Rio, I knew . . . a guy . . . kinda. My friend was right; I was taking the toughest option. I had given Peru a chance, but there was no comparison. My heart was in Rio, and nothing else would do. So, I said goodbye to my soccer team, my salsa squad, and all my new friends in Lima, and with a mixture of anxiety and optimism, got on the plane. It was an overnight flight across the Amazon; my plane crossed the mountains that encircle *A Cidade Maravilhosa* (the Marvelous City) just as the sun came rising out of the Atlantic Ocean, making both sky scrapers and the sea glow gold as we came in for a landing. The challenge was on. It was Brazil or Bust.

Fast forward two short months. I was skinny and exhausted with almost no appetite. I pulled on a sweatshirt to fend off the morning chill. It was always cold in that house, with the stone tile floors soaking up the damp chill of an unusually chilly and wet southern winter. Outside my bedroom door, thick dust was everywhere, and the walls reverberated with the sound of power tools. This was not working. The screen on my laptop displayed a list of flights. I was planning my trip home.

What had happened in those 2 months? A whole lot. I had known from the beginning, that I would have to trust God to pull multiple rabbits out of a hat for this plan to work, but I was optimistic. I knew that if Rio was where I was supposed to be, then I could trust the Lord to provide whatever I needed to stay. That so many things did fall into place only made the eventual decision to leave that much more difficult. I loved where I was living, in a hillside hostel overlooking the city center. I had made valuable contacts and had promising leads for both teaching English and DJing. I was playing weekly street soccer in a nearby *favela*. Perhaps most importantly, I had found a church nearby that quickly became my local Christian family. They had a vision for reaching the large foreign community in our part of the city, hoping someday to add services in English, and they were excited to have me participate in their ministry. It seemed that the necessary ingredients were falling into place. Perhaps God was going to make a way for me there after all.

There were other factors, however, that were working against me. To start, my financial situation was not ideal. Had I come to Brazil straightaway after leaving my job in the U.S., I could have had a much larger cushion, but my best friend’s wedding in Finland coupled with my two months in Peru, while necessary and wonderful, had been costly delays. By the time I finally landed in Brazil, my situation was precarious. I needed to find work immediately, and despite some promising clouds on the horizon, the rain was not coming soon enough. Although I was soon “hired” by two separate teaching agencies, it still takes time to receive a real schedule with real students. Actually getting paid is an even longer wait. DJing was at a standstill while I devoted myself primarily to pursuing teaching. In the meantime, funds were desperately low, and my bare-bones budget had to be cut back even more. My diet was reduced to the bare essentials of rice, beans, and homemade pancakes. In an effort to further cut costs, I moved out of my beloved hostel and agreed to help renovate a nearby yet-unopened bed and breakfast in return for a free bed. Having my own room in a million-dollar house was nice. Living in a construction site was not. I liked the young owners and my co-workers, but I never felt fully at peace with my choice to live there.

Finances were not the only issue. Shortly after my arrival there were also some serious moral shortcomings, followed by the crash in self-confidence that is so often a consequence. Was I really supposed to be there? Did I have what it takes to navigate a place like Rio, with its seemingly Kryptonite cocktail of temptations? Was God showing me I should be elsewhere? I wasn’t entirely derailed, but the experience left me badly shaken, distracted and low on emotional energy. The Christian life is often compared to running a race, but it is very difficult to run a race when we are preoccupied with running from ourselves.

given a full schedule of students by my first agency, only to have it taken away just hours later. My one student with my second agency had seemed like a perfect fit at our introductory meeting, but finances were tight for her too, she wouldn't be able to start lessons for at least another month. Once again, there were clouds, but still no rain.

I came to realize that it was not just my money that was spent. Every part of me was spent. I no longer felt that I was thinking clearly. No decision I made brought any sense of peace. My parents, even my sources of wise counsel, were over 4,000 miles away, and they were not about to pretend to know God's mind or make my decisions for me. I couldn't find any 11th commandment in the Bible saying "You shall or you shall not go." All I knew was that I was financially, mentally, and physically exhausted. Flights out of Rio were unusually low. I woke up one morning and knew it was time. It was one of the most difficult choices I have ever had to make, but this challenge had gone bust.

There were so many questions and second guesses running through my mind. I had a second stash of funds, set aside for long-term savings, future ministry expenses, and emergencies, which I had decided from day one would not to be used for day to day expenses on this trip. Using them would have bought me more time. By not using those funds, was I trusting too much in my savings, and not leaning enough on the Lord to provide for my needs? Or by using those funds, would I be ignoring God's direction, irresponsibly pursuing my desire to stay longer and acting as a poor steward of my resources? I still do not know the answer.

I had to question my commitment as well. Was leaving really following God's direction? Or was I only bailing because I was tired of being cold and sick, and fed up with rice and beans? "Real" missionaries don't get to leave when things get hard. Was I really committed to Brazil? Or just to having a good time?

Then came the comparisons. I wasn't the only young person with big dreams in a big city. I was surrounded by English teachers, artists, hostel owners, entrepreneurs, and others who were working hard at making a living. Some had come in previous years, taken a risk, and were now reaping the rewards. Did they have something I didn't? Americans and other westerners love to claim that "if you want it enough, you will make it happen". Did I not want it enough? Or worse, did I have some critical deficiency that was keeping me from taking the bull by the horns and "making it happen"? Or even from a Biblical perspective, had I been a "sluggard", folding my hands to rest one too many times?

Buying that ticket out actually brought a sense of relief in many ways. A final decision had been made and I was free to enjoy my last few days in Rio. I was the most relaxed I had been since my arrival. My appetite came back. But the relief came coupled with the feeling that I was letting so many people down. My volunteer class of high school kids, the aspiring flight attendant who had gone through three other teachers before deciding I was "the one", the young adults of my church who had welcomed me in so enthusiastically, the crew at the bed and breakfast, who had cared for me when I was sick. The goodbyes were hard.

I did hear from the teaching agency. The director later told me that she had been preparing to send me a new schedule the very day I bought my plane ticket and resigned my place. Shortly after, I heard from the production company I had hoped to DJ with. They were rebranding their events, looking for new talent, and wanted to know when I was returning to Rio. Since coming home, I was offered work by two more teaching agencies. In the end, I was offered work by every reputable group I had contacted.

I can only conclude that God had purposes for me that he has not yet disclosed. I believe that God's grace is sufficient for whatever race he calls us to run. I also believe that his grace comes in different forms, at different times, for different callings. For this challenge, that grace did not come in the time or form needed for me to stay on in good conscience.

People sometimes ask me, "What was God telling you?" or "Did you pray about it?". My first impulse, super sanctified Christian that I am, is to come across the table and grab them by the neck. The question often comes off as if either they assume that I never bothered to pray during all this, or that God is a vending machine that dispenses tidy answers on demand. I was praying. I had a whole beach, a well-lit half-mile of white sand to run up and down on at night and pray and cry my heart out. I have no idea what God was saying during that time. We often talk about how God opens or closes doors for us. Except that this door seemed to be just flapping in the breeze, swinging wide open one moment, only to slam shut the next.

I would love to be there right now, polishing the English of Rio's business community by day and creating the soundtrack for the city by night. I'm thankful for the two months I had in that incredible city. I'm also thankful for the home and the loving and supportive family I can return to. I'm thankful that my faith is stronger and deeper than it was before. The cross of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is bigger to me than it was before.

A Journey through the Beatitudes"

Using as a guide the book entitled "Studies in the Sermon on the Mount"
by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Continuing from last month:

It is reasonable to see from what we have covered so far that our Lord is giving us a description of the character and disposition of the Christian person. So now that this Christian person is born again and is in the kingdom of God lets look at what the Lord says should be the change in the actions of a person who has committed their lives to the Lord and his kingdom. This is where the Beatitudes begin to show that change and it carries throughout the rest of the Sermon on the Mount and New Testament.

Verse 7: " *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy*".

What does the scriptures mean by merciful? Remember now, we covered the five general principles we need to keep in mind if we are to understand the New Testament. One of those principles was that none of the descriptions given in these Beatitudes refers to what may be called a natural tendency. It is the result of the mercies and gift of God as given through the Holy Spirit at work in those who are in the kingdom of God. It is part of growing in the image of our Lord. Now why will the saints be blessed if they are merciful? For the rest of the Beatitude says: "... *for they shall receive mercy*". This is a statement that is like many in the scripture showing that we must understand the general principles first before we take a part of a verse or a whole verse and run with it. Within some of the church today there is this believe that what is being said here is that if you are not merciful you will not receive mercy from God. This is taking scripture piece meal before understanding the whole. This interpretation is wrong for two very important reasons. First, if we were to be judged strictly on those terms, it is certain that not one of us would be forgiven or receive mercy or see heaven. Second, if that interpretation is true it cancels the whole doctrine of grace, which we read from Ephesians: 2:8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith...". Scripture must interpret scripture. Only scripture has the truth from God. We must never interpret any scripture in such a manner as to contradict other scriptures. We must 'rightly divide the word of truth', and we must see that there is conformity of doctrine to doctrine.

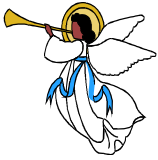
Remember we have said that these nine Beatitudes cannot be taken as separate entities. They are to be taken as a whole and in this logical sequence. So when applying these two precepts we see that we cannot know what the Lord is saying to us unless we attach it to the four preceding Beatitudes and in the order in which they are given. This mercy is supernatural, a free gift given to us by the mercy and grace of God through the Holy Spirit; this gift is gained for us by the mercy, grace and blood of our Lord and Savior. If we personally have received all that mercy from God we become empowered to give mercy to others regardless of their condition before God. The Lord is saying that if this kind of mercy to others begins to show in our lives it means that we have received mercy already from God.

Verse 8: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"*

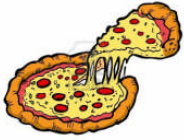
To get a true understanding of this Beatitude we need look at the words the Lord has used. Remember we are looking at spiritual things in the Beatitudes not earthly things. Lets look together at this word "heart". First, the gospel of Jesus Christ is concerned about the heart; read his teaching in the gospels and you will find that all along He is talking about the heart. In the scriptural and spiritual sense the heart is at the center of a person's being and personality; it is the basis out of which everything else comes. It includes the intellect, will and emotions. It forms who persons are on the inside of their being. So the Lord is making the point that he is talking about the center of their being and the source of their every activity. The gospel always starts with the heart. Second, the scriptures emphasize that the heart is always the seat of all our troubles. The Lord said in Matthew 15:19-20: "For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person." The world is telling us that the troubles are not in the person but in his or her environment, just change their environment and all will be well. But that is a fallacy because the first man and women were in the perfect environment of paradise and they defiled themselves. Well the world says maybe the answer is education. The facts show that some of the worst villains in history have been highly educated. No, the only true answer is what the Lord says; it is what is inside a person, their heart and because of the fall and the result of sin the heart is desperately wicked and deceitful. In light of that true description of the human heart how could anyone believe they could make themselves a Christian? So that's the meaning of the heart in this Beatitude. Lets now look at this other word "pure". One meaning is that it is without hypocrisy; it is single minded and focused. Another is that it carries the meaning of cleansed, with out defilement. Of course the perfect example of pure in heart is to be like the Lord Jesus. It means for us having an undivided love for God. In other words for us it means to keep 'the first and great commandment', which is that "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". Then to end this particular Beatitude Jesus says: "...for they shall see God". As these Beatitudes are at work in our lives we take on the image of the Lord and God declares us holy and pure in heart so that we will be able upon our death to see God. There is even a sense here on earth that we can see God at work in nature, at work in history, at work in our lives and the lives of other believers. So as born again believers in the kingdom of God we have this gift of 'seeing him who is invisible'. Remember now, this Beatitude like all the others is a gift from God. But it doesn't mean that we just sit back and wait for it to happen. As James tells us in 4:8: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you". Just because we know that we cannot purify and cleanse our own hearts does not mean that we should walk in the world's ways of life and just wait for God to cleanse us. We must do everything we can, out of love for God, to walk in the ways that scripture tells us and still know it is not enough, and that God must do it finally. All these Blessing in these Beatitudes are ours if we have received the faith to believe that grace and true came through Jesus Christ.

Next month we will continue our "Journey Through the Beatitudes"

Tom Ross
Elder Emeritus



GRACE CHURCH NEWS



Pizza and a Movie

The jr. high and high school Sunday school class is invited to the Bridgmans' for pizza and a movie (*The Nativity*). Come at **4:00, Sunday, December 18th** and feel free to bring a friend!

Christmas Sunday

Please join us on **Sunday, December 25th at 10:45 a.m.** for Christmas Sunday Worship. **Please note there will be no Sunday School classes.** Sunday School will resume on January 1, 2017, at 9:30 a.m.



New Year's Eve Prayer and Fellowship

Pastor Tom and Charleen invite you to come on over **Saturday, December 31st, New Year's Eve** for a time of prayer followed by food and fellowship (with games!) Bring an appetizer-type dish to share, beverage, or dessert. A sign-up sheet will be provided next Sunday for attendance and food contributions. Starting time to be decided.



Women's Fellowship

Enjoy encouraging fellowship as we look into the Scriptures and apply its truth to our lives at the monthly Women's Fellowship on **Saturday, January 14th.** Meet at the church from **9:30-11:00 a.m.** Breakfast goodies will be served.



Men's Prayer Fellowship

All men of the church are invited to join together for Bible study, discussion, prayer and fellowship on **Saturday morning, January 21st, from 7-8:30 a.m.** at the home of Doug Rose in Stockbridge. Light refreshments will be served.





December 2016 / January 2017

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18 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	19 7:00 Addictions Victorious	20 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	21	22	23	24 Christmas Eve 
25 Christmas Day 10:45 Worship	26 7:00 Addictions Victorious	27 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	28	29	30	31 New Year's Eve Prayer and Fellowship
1 New Year's Day 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	2 7:00 Addictions Victorious	3 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	4	5	6	7
8 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	9 7:00 Addictions Victorious	10 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	11	12	13	14 9:30-11 am Women's Fellowship
15 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	16 7:00 Addictions Victorious	17 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	18	19	20	21 7:00-8:30 am Men's Prayer Fellowship
22 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	23 7:00 Addictions Victorious	24 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	25	26	27	28
29 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	30 7:00 Addictions Victorious	31 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class				