

In the World, Not of the World

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

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Good morning! This morning I will be talking about how to be *in* the world, not *of* the world. I am not a Bible scholar or a theologian. Like you, I am a Christian on a faith journey. What I will be sharing this morning is an idea that has meant a lot to me on my faith journey. I hope that what I share may be helpful to you as well.

Let's begin by recognizing that the teachings of Jesus are counter-cultural. His teachings contradict some of the values of the secular, commercial culture in which we live. For example, people have long considered power and wealth to be symbols of success. But the Bible tells us that power and wealth are false idols. They can be used as tools to help others, but in and of themselves, they do not satisfy—they cannot make us happy. They are not part of the spiritual life that God intends for us.

We know that Jesus refused earthly power and pointed us away from material wealth. Early in his ministry, Satan tried to tempt Jesus with power and wealth. We read this in the Gospel of Matthew at 4:8-11:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Jesus declined to become an earthly king. After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd wanted to make Jesus king—by force. But Jesus escaped from the crowd. He didn't come to be an earthly king.

As for money, Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke at 12:15: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." In the Gospel of Matthew at 6:19-21, Jesus said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Gospel of Matthew at 19:23 tells us that after his interaction with the rich young man, Jesus said to his disciples: “I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Power and wealth are symbols of success in many cultures, but Jesus rejected them. We should not seek power, we should seek to be of service. We should not seek material possessions, we should seek to be spiritually rich.

Of course, it is hard to avoid the values of the secular, commercial culture, because they surround us every day. How do we do that? How do we live in a counter-cultural way? I think Jesus gave us the answer. We must be *in* the world, not *of* the world.

At the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for his disciples. We read this in the Gospel of John at 17:14-15:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

Jesus was fully engaged in the world, teaching, healing, and saving. As his disciples, we, too, need to be in the world, loving and helping others. We do not have to be *against* the world. N.T. Wright reminds us that the kingdom Jesus inaugurated is emphatically *for* this world. C.S. Lewis would remind us that God loves the world— He created it!

But while we are fully engaged in the world, we do not have to measure ourselves by the world’s values or its definition of “success.” We do not have to be “of” the world. That gives us great freedom. We have been liberated from the unhappy, competitive world of power, wealth, fame, status, and prestige. We are free to develop the gifts God has given us. We are free to be who God intends us to be and do what God intends us to do. If we happen to acquire power, wealth, and fame, we can simply use them as tools to advance the Kingdom of God.

There are many people who have used their gifts in loving service, without worrying about symbols of success. I can think of two people I have met who left symbols of secular success in order to serve others— Dr. Tan Lai Yong and John Howell.

Dr. Tan Lai Yong is a Singaporean medical doctor. In 1996, he was sent to China by his church as a cross-cultural worker. He went to rural Yunnan with his wife and year-old daughter, and stayed for 14 years. He diagnosed and healed villagers, trained over 500 local doctors, and gave basic medical training to farmers. He also mobilized surgeons from Kunming and Singapore to provide surgery for cleft palate, burns, and bone deformities for over 100 children. Back in Singapore now, he is a senior lecturer in the School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore.

John Howell is another example of a person who has used his gifts in loving service to others, without worrying about symbols of success. I met John many years ago when he was a sales director at a telecommunications company. Later, he left his successful career in order to serve children and families at a struggling nonprofit organization. Here is how he explains his decision:

My life in sales was grueling. I always exceeded my quotas and made the bosses happy, but after more than twenty years, it was wearing on me. We were constantly restructuring, and firing people, and it just wasn't enjoyable. One day, returning to work after an illness, I began to wonder what it was all for. I started going back to church and doing volunteer work in the community. A friend told me about an opening with a nonprofit group, and with a 'leap of faith,' I applied for the position.

I was working for one of the biggest companies in the state, earning a good salary. By contrast, the nonprofit organization was near bankruptcy... I got the job, and within weeks I knew that was where I was supposed to be.

In my sales work, the focus had been on the transaction more than the people. Success was measured in money, not whether you had made a difference or changed a life. Now I can see how I am helping to change lives— how kids are growing, and getting healthier, and doing things that they couldn't do before. I also get to be a teacher, training a new generation of managers and leaders within our organization. I get tremendous meaning and satisfaction from my work.

Somebody who really understood the counter-cultural character of the teachings of Jesus was Mother— now Saint— Teresa. I like to tell people that Mother Teresa didn't start out as Mother Teresa. She didn't start out with a big organization and support from people all over the world. She started out with no money— she had to beg for food and supplies. She went out into the street and helped the first person, and then the second person. Gradually other women joined her. Eventually, she founded a religious order, the Missionaries of Charity. At the time she died in 1997, she was leading 517 missions and 450 centers in over 100 countries.

There is a movie about Mother Teresa starring Olivia Hussey. At the end of the movie, there is a scene in a board room high up in a modern skyscraper, a tall building of glass and steel. People are lined up along both sides of a long table. Mother Teresa is there with other sisters of her order, as well as a priest who has been supporting her work for many years. It is a meeting of the international organization that has been established to coordinate the work of the hundreds of centers that have been inspired by Mother Teresa. The people are good people who are doing what people in the secular world do— they set up a corporation, fly around the world to hold meetings, send out newsletters, and so forth.

Each person at the table has a bottle of water. While the meeting is going on, Mother Teresa asks one of the attendants what each bottle cost. "Three dollars," he says. "With three dollars I can send a child to school for a whole year," Mother Teresa replies. Then she asks how much it cost to rent the board room. The attendant doesn't know.

Finally, while the priest is explaining the new text message technology that will be an inexpensive way for them to send messages to each other around the world, Mother Teresa stands. She says that she has nothing against all this, but she and her sisters have chosen another way to serve the Lord. They are going back to their roots, to be the poor among the poor. Everyone at the table is shocked as she instructs one of the sisters to close the bank accounts and shut down the corporation.

Mother Teresa decided that she was not going to be drawn into the secular, commercial culture. She wasn't going to spend thousands of dollars on an international organization that coordinated the work of her centers around the world. No— she went back to her roots, back to the person-to-person love and service that had always characterized her calling to be the poor among the poor.

Later in the movie, the priest who had worked closely with her for many years told her that she had made the right decision. She responded by saying: “We must never be afraid of being a sign of contradiction to the world.” The centers grew up through faith, love, and service, not by creating corporations and spending money on meetings.

A few years ago, my wife and I visited India, and spent time at the Mother Teresa Center in Calcutta. While we were there we saw her room— a small room with a bed, a dresser, a desk, and a chair. We thought of that little room as her world headquarters. She didn’t need a big fancy office to inspire people all over the world. Money wasn’t being spent on the trappings of office, it was being spent on children, the sick, the hungry, the poor.

By the way, there was a museum at the Mother Teresa Center in Calcutta. It was a small room with glass cabinets and display cases with newspaper articles and artifacts relating to Mother Teresa’s life. We noticed that her Nobel Prize was not prominently displayed. In fact, it was on the floor in one of the cabinets. It wasn’t a big deal.

My experience is that the secular, commercial world is very focused on power, wealth, fame, prestige, and social status. There are things you are supposed to do to have a successful career, working your way up the career ladder. You are supposed to constantly seek more money, more power, and more subordinates.

I am not sure I always understand what God wants me to do. But the times when I have been pretty sure have been times when I stepped away from the career ladder defined by the secular world. I have gone from positions of more power to positions of less power, from positions that paid more to positions that paid less, from positions that led more people to positions that led fewer people. I also voluntarily stepped out of the workforce for several years. That is not what the secular, commercial world says you are supposed to do to build your career. But each time I did what I thought God was calling me to do. And each time it was meaningful, new doors opened, and opportunities arose that would not have arisen if I had stayed in the career ladder and followed the rules of the secular world.

Here are a couple of examples. I served as President of Chaminade University from 1989 to 1995. I was the first Protestant president of a Catholic university anywhere in the known universe. Chaminade was about to go bankrupt and lose accreditation. I did not apply for the position— I was asked by the Board of Regents to lead the turnaround. Pacific Rim Christian University did not exist

then, so Chaminade was the only local Christian university at the time. I felt called to take the job. I led a team that during the next six years achieved the turnaround, re-establishing accreditation and figuring out how to make the university work financially. It was a tumultuous time, with lots of conflict and controversy, but we managed to reshape the university so that it could succeed in the future.

I agreed to serve as President for four years, and I stayed for six. One day, in my sixth year, I was sitting at my desk in my office at Chaminade. I remember sitting there, looking down at my hands. It occurred to me that I had said all I could say, and I had done all I could do. I felt good about what we had accomplished, but I also knew that it was time for a new leader. So I resigned.

People didn't understand. Why would I give up a position of power and prestige? People don't do that. People *cling* to power and prestige. People don't decide that they have made the contribution they can make, and then move on. They only leave when there is a scandal, or they are fired, or they get a better job.

After resigning, I did something that confused people even more. I went back to school. One month I was a university president, and the next month I was a student at a dormitory at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles—with a 17-year-old roommate. I am willing to certify that he was the most disappointed freshman in the history of higher education. He left Virginia and travelled all the way to California for freedom, and they gave him a roommate older than his father. Actually, we became friends because I *wasn't* his father—I had no responsibility for him.

People were very suspicious about my move from president to student. People go to school to get a job, and I already had a job. Why give up my job to go to school? I had it all backwards. What was I doing?

For three years, I had no formal organizational affiliation. I was a full-time unemployed graduate student with a wife and three kids. (Don't try that without a supportive spouse!) It was an exciting time of renewal. When I was at Chaminade, I often worked 60 or 80 hours per week. Now I was in a doctoral program, and I took it seriously, but now I time to spend with my family. I had time to pick up the kids after school and go for a swim. I had more time to be with my wife, and even more time to be helpful at home. You would have to ask Elizabeth if I *was* helpful, but I had more *time* to be helpful. I had time to learn new things, and I had time to be creative.

While I was having this wonderful, renewing, enriching season of my life, the secular, commercial world saw me as a has-been. I was a failure. I was only 47, but according to the secular, commercial world, my career was over.

One day, I was at home doing some writing, and the phone rang. It was a reporter. He asked to speak to Kent Keith, and I said he had found me. He said he was writing a story about people whose careers had had a meteoric rise, and then fizzled. "Oh," I asked, "who did you want to talk about?" You," he answered. "Me?" I said. "I'm still young, I'm getting my doctorate, I will be back at work again. What do you mean, *fizzled*?"

I don't think he liked my attitude. It was clear to him, in any case, that he wasn't going to get the kind of interview he wanted. So he hung up, and I went back to writing.

What was I writing when the reporter called to tell me my career had fizzled? I was writing a book. Years later, that book became a national bestseller that was translated into 17 languages. The book was called *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments*. Some of you know the back story.

In the sixties, when I was in college, I spent a lot of time working with high school student leaders. When I was 19, a college sophomore, I wrote a short book for them titled *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*. As just part of that booklet, I wrote 149 words that I called The Paradoxical Commandments. We sold 25,000 or 30,000 copies of that little book around the country between 1968 and 1972, and then I went on with my life.

What I didn't know then, but know now, is that people were lifting the commandments out of that little book and were putting them up on walls, and including them in speeches, and reprinting them in books. The commandments spread all over the world, until today, millions of people have used them.

In 1997, thirty years after I first wrote the Paradoxical Commandments, I learned that Mother Teresa had put them up on the wall of her children's home in Calcutta. That changed my life. I thought that was some kind of a message, a big hint from God that I was supposed to do something. So I started speaking and writing about the commandments again, thirty years after I first wrote them.

When my book was launched in 2001, a total of 23 publishers around the world bought the rights to publish my book in their countries and languages.

Penguin Putnam bought the rights in the U.S. They got me on the *Today Show* on TV, and they got my photo and an article on the front page of *The New York Times*, along with feature articles in *The Washington Post* and *People* magazine. By the way, when *People* magazine did a two-page feature article on me, my image of the magazine shot way up. I didn't know that *People* magazine was about finding personal meaning and the life of the spirit.

So I was suddenly a success as the secular, commercial culture defines success. I wish that I had written down the name of that reporter, because I could have called him up and said, "Guess what? I *un-fizzled!*" But I couldn't remember who he was, and it didn't really matter. What mattered was that I felt called to write, so I did. I would have never written the book if I had stayed in the career ladder, doing what the secular world says you are supposed to do. I stepped away, and something surprising and extraordinary happened.

During my time working on my doctorate, I spent more time with my children, and became more aware of programs for children and families. So when I went back to work, I joined the staff at the YMCA of Honolulu. I loved it. During the years I worked there, my faith, my family, and my personal values were wonderfully connected. The YMCA is not about secular symbols of success like power, wealth, fame, prestige, or status. It is all about making a difference in the lives of children and families. That's why people work there.

Sadly, other people don't understand. I was reminded of that by a woman I met at a community meeting. "You work for the Y?" she asked. "Yes," I said, and she started to tell me how much her son enjoyed working there. He worked with children, coaching them in various sports. He got up happy every morning, looking forward to going to work, and he came home happy every night, describing all the things that he and the children did that day. She explained all this, and then stopped and said: "I wish he would get a *real* job some day."

I was stunned. He had a real job— a *very* real job. He was helping children to develop skills, and learn about teamwork, and learn about self-discipline and how to achieve their goals. He was having an impact that would benefit them for the rest of their lives. His mother thought he didn't have a real job because he didn't have any power, wealth, fame, prestige, or status. But the simple fact is that he didn't need any. He was finding a lot of meaning by changing lives for the better.

Yes, it is challenging to be *in* the world, not *of* the world. It is not easy to be counter-cultural. But we cannot waiver. Christ has taught us how to live. When we follow him, we have his assurances. Jesus said: “I am the way and the truth and the life.” He said: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit...” When we remain in him and he in us, we will bring hope and joy to many. We will help those who need help the most. And we will do it without worrying about what the secular, commercial world thinks. When we are who *God* wants us to be, not who *the world* wants us to be, we will be blessed, and we will be a blessing to others.

Amen.