

“What Would Jesus Say to Confirmation Students and Graduates”

Theme: What Would Jesus Say...

Sermon Scripture: Matthew 6:31-34

Family Activity for the Week: Everyone has been given spiritual gifts by God to serve others. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. In this season of graduation, spend some time identifying your family member's spiritual gifts and how they can be used to serve the world. (You can take a spiritual gifts inventory on our website.) Get some markers and a small blank box for each member of the family. Invite each family member to write or draw a picture on each person's box representing a spiritual gift they see in that person. When each family member has written on everyone's box, ask each person to share two ways they will use their gifts in the world. Display your family's boxes as reminders to use their gifts to serve and care for others. Thank God for giving you these gifts and pray God will use you and your family to share His love with the world.

Monday, April 29 – Read Matthew 5:3-16. Speaking to students, Jesus would likely offer words very like the Sermon on the Mount. Scholar William Barclay noted that the Greek verb translated “taught” in Matthew 5:2 meant “repeated and habitual action,” so the translation could accurately be, “This is what he used to teach them.” If Jesus led off his speech to graduates this way, it would quickly be clear that his view of a worthwhile life differed from many common ideas. His approach could make his followers like salt and light in the world.

- “‘Blessed’ (or ‘Happy’) translates a Greek word which is used quite frequently in the Septuagint as a translation of a Hebrew word meaning “Oh the happiness of... What [the usual English] translations do not indicate clearly is that the one doing the good is God.” Scholar N. T. Wright said, “In our world, still, most people think wonderful news consists of success, wealth, long life, victory in battle. Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers.” Which of Jesus’ statements ring most true to you? Do any of them lead you to think, “I wish that characterized my life”?
- J. K. Rowling said, “One of the many things I learned...was this, written by the Greek author Plutarch: What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.” Jesus said our inward attitudes would make his followers “the salt of the earth...the light of the world.” Rule-based morality too often brings gloom, criticism, and fear. Have you known people whose warm-hearted goodness adds flavor and light to life? How can your loyalty to Christ make you “salt and light,” flavoring and brightening your life and that of others?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I want the kind of happiness, of blessedness, that your Kingdom offers me. Shape my heart to value what you value, to rejoice in the eternal life you give. Amen.*

Tuesday, April 30 – Read Matthew 5:20-24, 38-48. Author of the Harry Potter books J. K. Rowling told Harvard graduates, “We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.” Jesus imagined and offered better—a righteousness “greater” than that of his day’s proud religious leaders. That “greater” righteousness grew from purified thoughts and motives, not just obeying outward rules. He called people to seek reconciliation, not revenge. Be like God, he said, loving tirelessly rather than settling scores.

- John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, said Jesus called us to be “perfect in love,” always growing toward loving with God’s all-inclusive love. He rejected the idea that “perfect” meant never sinning (missing the mark). Does it challenge you more, or less, to think that being “complete” or “perfect” is about the state of your heart rather than just your outward actions?
- Concerned about outward righteousness, Jerusalem’s religious leaders asked Pilate to hurry the deaths of three people to protect the purity of the special Passover Sabbath (cf. John 19:31). Jesus asked God to forgive the people who nailed him to the cross (cf. Luke 23:34). How does that illuminate Jesus’ meaning when he spoke of a righteousness “greater” than one concerned only with externals?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I want to be truly righteous, not just to look that way from the outside. Reshape me from the inside out to fully live as your loving child and obedient servant. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 1 – Read Matthew 6:1-18. Jesus warns us to beware of the urge to live a life mainly aimed at impressing others. People who have a significant impact on the world are not those who were never criticized. Instead, they didn’t give up when criticized. Jesus taught what we call the Lord’s Prayer, but not as a magic formula for us to recite by rote. It was a model to guide us into personal, trusting prayer, done not to impress people or God, but simply to help us connect honestly with God.

- J. K. Rowling said, “Ultimately, we all have to decide for ourselves what constitutes failure, but the world is quite eager to give you a set of criteria if you let it.” It takes courage to live a life guided by God’s principles even when “the world” misunderstands and criticizes us. Have you ever had to ignore the “set of criteria” that family, friends or co-workers wanted to impose on you to live out God’s calling on your life?
- Here’s a simple way to examine who you’re trying to impress, shared by Pastor John Ortberg: “Every once in a while, do something good and try to make sure no one finds out about it.” Why not try that this week? Keep some notes (only for your eyes, and God’s) about how it feels to increase your freedom from what Ortberg called “the narcotic of approval.”

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I want you to be the “audience of one” to whom I direct my life focus and energy. Keep teaching me how to live every moment as though I am in your presence—because I am. Amen.*

Thursday, May 2 – Read Matthew 6:19-34. J. K. Rowling told her Harvard audience, “Personal happiness lies in knowing that life is not a checklist of acquisition or achievement.” Jesus would tell students (and parents) that the human heart has room for only one supreme allegiance. Give that loyalty to God, not wealth, he’d say. And using hyperbole (exaggeration to make a point - “That bag weighs a ton”), he would warn students about the dangers of worry (which is different from planning).

- Conduct a simple life audit. Review your calendar and your checkbook. Based on the time, energy, and resources reflected there, what “master(s)” do those tools say you are serving? Can you see ways your loyalties are shifting as you choose to invest in heavenly treasure? Are there other changes you could make to give you greater freedom to fully serve God as Lord of your life?
- Jesus seemed to anticipate modern research when he asked, “Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life?” (verse 27) There is a great deal of research that points in the other direction, suggesting that worry likely shortens our lives. How can you distinguish needs from wants and plan for the future without worrying about it?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you are Lord of my life, and I want to “collect treasures” in heaven. Teach me how to live a life of peace and trust, in which my energy focuses on your purposes rather than my fears. Amen.*

Friday, May 3 - Read Matthew 7:1-12. J. K. Rowling lauded imagination as “the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.” We need that kind of empathy to live out Jesus’ “Golden Rule”: because God is generous to you, you should treat others as you would wish them to treat you. He’d also urge us to take responsibility for our own life, rather than spending energy judging or condemning others. And he’d urge us to “ask,” “search,” and “knock” - in other words, to pray - regularly.

- Several thinkers wrote “negative” forms of the Golden Rule (e.g. “Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you”). But scholar William Barclay noted that Jesus brought a different emphasis: “The attitude which says, ‘I must do no harm to people is quite different from the attitude which says, ‘I must do my best to help people.’” What are some practical ways you seek to treat others as you would wish them to treat you? When has someone else related to you based on the Golden Rule?
- Taking responsibility for your own thoughts, emotions, words, and actions instead of blaming others can be difficult. Yet healthy, authentic, loving community depends on your ability to “take the log out of your eye.” What “log(s)” do you wrestle with? What issues keep you from living as Jesus taught us? How can you more fully reflect the grace God extends to you in the way you treat others?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, when you met anyone, your eyes were full of love, not contempt. Set me free from the addictive feeling of superiority when I find a “sin” in someone else and fill my vision with the love and grace you extend to me. Amen.*

Saturday, May 4 – Read Matthew 7:13-27. In summary, Jesus would likely tell students that the principles of his kingdom give us a solid foundation for a purposeful life. But it can feel risky trying to live by Jesus’ principles, both because they run counter to much “conventional wisdom,” and because it can be hard to know how to apply those principles to specific situations. We must not let fear stop us from setting living in a kingdom vision for our lives and the world. To live is to risk. If we always choose the risk-free, completely safe, and convenient path in life, we’ll find the failure we experience is the failure to truly live. Every person holds the basic hope of leaving a lasting positive impact on the world. To build a life that stands the test of time, Jesus said, take the apparent risk of building that life on his principles.

- J. K. Rowling quoted Seneca, a Roman philosopher who said, “As is a tale, so is life: not how long it is, but how good it is, is what matters.” Jesus would add that a good life seldom lies at the end of the easiest road. He said, “Go in through the narrow gate” (verse 13) and “the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it” (verse 14). Jesus’ path, though not always easy or comfortable in the short run, produces the best life in the long run.
- When have you had to choose between an easy but wrong way, and another that was difficult but right? What did you decide? When have you benefited from choosing the right course? At what points has choosing the “narrow gate” added freedom and meaning to your life?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, set me free to more and more live in your kingdom. Transform me until I want what you want. Help me fix my eyes daily on you. Give me courage to live into your kingdom vision for my life. Amen.*