

Beyond The Norm

Good morning!

Today is Grad Sunday. We're celebrating a group of our young adults who have just received their high school diplomas and have thus, been set loose upon society.

They've been honored at graduation ceremonies, and graduation parties. They've heard speeches full of advice from their fellow students, teachers and family.

And now, buckle up kids, you get to hear some more... from me!

Of course this isn't just sage advice and encouragement exclusive to 17 and 18 year olds. It's also applicable to human beings of all ages, particularly human beings who claim to know and follow Jesus.

So buckle up the rest of you, this message is for you too!

Today, I'd like to talk a little about expectations. What the world expects of you, of us, versus what God expects from you and us.

The world would be thrilled if you all would just grow up to be normal. And the world is thrilled when we, as followers of Jesus Christ, settle for normal lives.

And if we're honest, by and large, we really do have this desire to be normal! Normal is good! If I'm normal no one will notice me! If I appear to be like everyone else, then I can escape the scrutiny of everyone else!

Because one thing normal people love to do, is to point out what makes other people not normal, and then to make fun of that difference!

And when people make fun of us, that makes us feel bad about ourselves, which makes us unhappy. And unhappy people are most definitely not normal!

Or, are they?

The problem with normal is that, when it comes to the world, is normal never stays the same. Have you noticed that? What's normal now, isn't necessarily what was normal last year, or ten years ago.

Turns out normal is influenced by a lot of constantly changing circumstances in our society.

Let me give you just a couple of examples:

- In 1900 the divorce rate in the United States was about 10%.
Today, the divorce rate is right about 50%. The point being, the norm of marriage lasting a lifetime, has changed.
- In 1950 the percentage of mothers with school aged children holding jobs outside the home was about 8%.
Today, more than 70% of mothers with school aged children work; and more than two thirds of those mothers hold full-time jobs!

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying mothers shouldn't work outside the home, I am saying that the normal for moms to hold job outside the home has drastically changed over the last 70 years!

My point is; society's normal is always changing! And it's awfully hard to hit a target that's moving like that!

Our pursuit of normal too often produces devastating consequences in our lives, and the lives of those around us!

And yet, too many of us spend our lives chasing what we think is normal! And here's the deal, when we chase normal, when we chase the things of this world, we're chasing a lie!

1 John 2:15-17 tells us:

¹⁵ Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Jesus Himself warns us in **Luke 21:34**,

⁴ “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”

That word dissipation means distraction, diversion, amusement. And truly, those are the things that are weighing people down in this culture, this society! And truly, for far too many people chasing what they think is normal, what they hope is normal, the trap is already closing!

We think we're chasing what's right but in reality, we're chasing what's wrong! We think we're chasing what's important, but in reality we're chasing the meaningless!

We think we're chasing what's fulfilling, but in reality we're racing right into the arms of emptiness, frustration and eventually death!

How did we get so far off course? How do we find our way back?
How do you new high school graduates avoid getting off course?

We start by recognizing that God has not called us to be normal!
We start by recognizing God has called us to be holy!

Multiple times in the Old Testament, God calls His people to be holy because He's holy!

That call is repeated by the Apostle Peter who encourages us:

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:13-16)

What the world is trying to draw us toward, and what God is calling us to are about as opposite as they could possibly be!

And when we begin to allow God to move us toward His calling, normal will not be how the world describes you. No, the world will consider you off the charts abnormal! In fact, the world will consider you just plain weird!

For most people in this world's culture, God is weird! And so are His followers!

Of course, by the standards of the world's culture, with the definition of weird being someone or something that is counter-culture, it's true! God, the things of God, the people of God, are completely abnormally weird to this world!

But we're not the first culture to get things inside-out, topsy-turvy.

Open your Bibles to Psalm 115. Here's a passage that talks about what we're talking about, only from way back in the days of ancient Israel.

Psalm 115:2-8,

Why do the nations say, "Where is their God?" Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. But their idols are of silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

A little history here, very little actually.

We don't know who wrote this psalm, and we don't know when it was written. Some Bible scholars think it was written during the Assyrian or Babylonian exiles. Some think it might have been written afterwards. But we can see some similarities between what was going on in the culture then, and what's happening in our culture now.

The Jews were in a situation where people are asking them, *"Hey, where is this God you keep talking about?"* Just like people today ask those of *us* who profess to know Jesus, *"Where is your God?"*

The culture then had created its own gods out of silver and gold, just as unbelievers today have created their own gods. And really, we've always been good at creating idols to worship, and gods to answer the questions we can't otherwise figure out on our own.

Someone once said; *"On the sixth day, God created man. On the seventh day, man returned the favor."*

And while we Christians chuckle at the audacity of the idea that we could create God, that thought is more sad than funny.

The psalmist here is quick to rightly point out the God who created everything is in heaven and does whatever He pleases. Because, He's God! And that is most certainly still true today!

And then he states the obvious, "*the gods*" created by man have mouths, but can't speak; eyes, but can't see; ears, but can't hear. The point being the gods man creates to replace the God that created man, are absolutely useless and dead! And, what's more, the people who make those gods and trust in them, ultimately become just like their gods.

The people in the time of this psalmist thought it was normal to create their own gods, they thought it was normal to worship idols of silver and gold. As for those who believed in the Hebrew God, well the people of that day thought they were just plain weird!

But look down a bit at **Psalm 115**. Look at verses **11-13**:

You who fear him, trust in the LORD – he is their help and shield. The LORD remembers us and will bless us: He will bless the house of Israel, he will bless the house of Aaron, he will bless those who fear the LORD – small and great alike.

It's almost as if the psalmist, in these encouraging verses, is calling on the people of Israel, and us, to quit chasing the normal of that culture, and embrace the weird!

It's like he's saying if the world sees God and His people as weird, we should go with that!

There are a lot of people who think they're normal in this world.
Normal people who have mouths, but they aren't talking about God, or discussing God things.

Normal people who have eyes, but they are somehow blind to God's goodness in their lives.

Normal people who have hands, hands they use to accumulate stuff, lots and lots of stuff, rather than using to serve the Lord.

Normal people whose normalcy, is in fact, killing them!

Normal people who are dying to know this weird God, who offers them life, and life abundant!

And weirdly enough the plan this weird God has for these normal people to get to know Him, involves them getting to know His weird followers!

And that's where we abnormal weirdos come in!

It's up to us to reject the norms of this world and embrace the weird!

What are those abnormal, weird things God would have us do in our world?

Well, He would have you love the world just like you love yourself.

To this culture, that's weird! That's not normal! In fact, in today's society that concept is the epitome of abnormal weirdness! Everywhere you turn you hear someone say "*I have to learn to love myself, I need to learn to put myself first!*" That's the way the world thinks!

But Paul, in **Philippians 2:3** tells us, ³ *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*

“What? All my life I’ve been told I need to look out for number one, and that’s me! Isn’t it? All my life I’ve heard ‘winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing!’ and ‘second place is just another way of saying first loser’ and now you’re telling me I’m supposed to consider that guy is better than me?! That’s not normal, that’s weird!”

It is! It’s weird in a God way.

Listen to a little bit more of Philippians 2, starting in verse 5:

⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

And Jesus Himself tells us in **Matthew 5:43-45**,⁴³ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”*

OK, it’s getting even weirder! Not only do I have to consider others better than me, but I also have to love my enemies! Now that’s totally abnormally weird!

Yes it is! Totally, abnormally weird in a God way!

How do we show that love? This love that is genuinely focused on the other person, this love that extends even to our enemies?

What does that love even look like?

Well, the Bible says it looks like mercy.

Mercy, there's another abnormally weird subject when it comes to this world. Mercy to the follower of Jesus; is God not giving us what we do deserve. But that's not how the world does things!

The world says, *"You get what you deserve!" "What goes around comes around!" "Karma's gonna getcha!"* The world isn't into showing mercy!

Yet God pours His mercy on us! And God expects His followers to let that mercy flow from us to the world.

And to the world, that is not normal! That is abnormally weird!

A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son.

The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death. *"But I don't ask for justice,"* the mother explained. *"I plead for mercy."*

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, *"it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."*

Napoleon thought about that for a moment and said, *"Well, then, I will have mercy."* And he spared the woman's son.

Here's what's really abnormally weird about God's mercy: we don't have to ask for it, He offers it to us freely!

Psalm 145:9 says, *The LORD is good to all: And his tender mercies are over all his works.*

I don't know about you, but whenever I think about what I truly deserve – which I seldom do, because it's so depressing – I'm blown away by God's desire to offer mercy to me!

When we think about what we truly deserve for the sins we've committed against such a wonderfully holy God, we can start to understand Isaiah when he saw God high and lifted up, and says in **Isaiah 6:5**, *“Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips...”*

Yet God has a vested interest in making sure we don't get what we deserve! He shed the innocent blood of His Son Jesus Christ to keep you and me from getting what we deserve! Jesus took the punishment that we had coming!

Titus 3:5 says *...he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.*

Mercy! That's an abnormally weird concept for this world to grasp! And that's understandable. I'm a follower of Jesus, and I still have difficulty wrapping my mind around the idea of God's mercy toward me!

But as followers of Jesus, we're not called to have a PhD in mercy! We're simply called to extend the mercy God has extended us, to other people!

That's what Jesus tells us in **Luke 6:36**, *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

The world looks at mercy and says, *“That's abnormally weird!”*

Yes it is, abnormally weird in a God way!

But it doesn't end there!

Christians are called to show God's love to others, by putting them ahead of our own desires! Even loving those who treat us badly, even our enemies! That's abnormally weird!

And we're called to extend the mercy God extends to us, to people who don't deserve it! That's abnormally weird.

And this: we're called to share with our enemies, with those people who don't deserve it, God's grace! God's amazing grace!

If mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve, then God's grace is God giving us what we don't deserve! And grace, in this world, in this culture, is most definitely abnormally weird!

Paul explains grace to us in **Ephesians 2**, verses **4 through 9**:

⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

That's grace!

God, who loves us so much, has this incredible plan – a plan to redeem us from our fallen state and restore us to a true relationship with Him – and He does that by absolutely lavishing upon us these incredible blessings that we absolutely don't deserve!

Billy Graham was driving through a small southern town one day, when he was stopped by a policeman and ticketed for speeding. Graham admitted his guilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court. So, Graham went to court. In court the judge asked, "Guilty, or not guilty?" When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied,

"That'll be ten dollars, a dollar for every mile an hour you went over the speed limit."

But the judge recognized Graham and said, *"You have violated the law and the fine must be paid, but I am going to pay it for you."* The judge then took a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner! *"That,"* said Billy Graham, *"is how God treats repentant sinners!"* And that, to this world, this culture, is abnormally weird!

And it is abnormally weird, in a God way!

And when we, as the professed followers of Jesus Christ, live our lives the way Jesus has called us to, when we really love our enemies, when really we show them mercy, when really we show them grace, we're going to seem really abnormally weird to the world!

That's ok though... we'll be abnormally weird in a God way!

1 Corinthians 1:18 tells us: ¹⁸ *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

But you know what? I'm guessing before most of us came to know Jesus, all this stuff about God's love, His mercy and his grace, that was foolishness to us, wasn't it? All this God stuff was just plain abnormally weird!

And that's something we can never forget!

I want to read this to you... it's from Clark Tanner's sermon, ***The Completeness of Reconciliation***. Tanner says:

"Christians, we have no right to look down our noses with disdain on unsaved people. We can and should be offended at sin, but not personally offended – offended for God and His holiness. But if we can get it in our

heads and in our hearts that when we were dead He gave us life, when we were unknowing He gave us faith, when we were enemies He came all the way down to us to make peace, then we must realize that in ourselves we are no higher and no better than the vilest of sinners and it is God's grace and mercy alone that has separated us from the rest."

Listen, if we combine that realization, with the mandate we have to live Holy lives as God's abnormally weird children, then we're going to be different than the world!

When we live lives guided not by what the world says is normal, but by the principles of God and His Word, we're necessarily going to be different!

We'll be different in the way we handle our time, our money, our relationships, our values!

Not different for difference sake, but different for God's sake! And that's the kind of difference that makes a difference!

Adults, when you live the life God has called you to live, you're going to seem abnormally weird to the rest of the world!

Young adults, our newly graduated teenagers, when you live lives as true children of God, you're going to be really abnormally weird to the world!

But understand this: the world has things all backwards! What they hold as truth is a lie! What they believe is good is, in fact, killing them!

That's why the world needs to see us as abnormally weird!
It's the only way they're going to see what's really real!

So graduates, adults, all of us, let's be willing to be different, to be abnormally weird, in a God way!

A pastor I know, John Wilson, of Farm Loop Christian Center in Palmer, Told me about an experience he had as a missionary in China. One day, John was with his Chinese friends in a city doing street evangelism, a very dangerous thing to do in that country. They were each openly sharing their testimony, how they came to know Jesus, what He has done in their lives. As they spoke, the crowd on the street grew until several hundred people were standing around listening. When it came time for John to give his testimony, he stepped forward, and as he did, a man rushed out, running right at John and screaming something at him in Chinese! John said it was clear the man's intention was to injure him. And, like almost anyone would do, John began to turn so he could run away! But as he picked up his foot to run, John said God spoke to him clearly and calmly, saying: *"If you take one more step, I won't be able to use you."* John said he stopped, and in his mind, determined he had to stand his ground. So he turned back around, planted his feet, and dropped his arms to his side, leaving himself completely defenseless to his attacker. As he did, John said the man said suddenly bounced backward, landing on the seat of his pants, as if the man had run into something.

John said the man had a look of surprise that immediately changed to terror! He was staring and pointing at something above John's head, screaming something in total fear! The man scrambled to his feet, and ran away, screaming as he went.

Then, as the scene quieted down, John gave his testimony.

That afternoon 200 people gave their life to Christ! 200 people stepped out of death and into eternal life, because John Wilson was willing to do something totally abnormally weird!

Yes, the world thinks we're abnormal and weird! But that's ok, we're not living for the world, we're living for God!

Remember David? When he finally brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem? Remember how the Bible says he danced and danced, until his wife told him he was acting like a fool? Remember what David said? David said, *"I will become even more undignified than this..."*

(2 Samuel 6:22)

Graduates, Adults, all of us need to be willing to be undignified to the lost people of this world! We need to be willing to seem abnormally weird to them, but abnormally weird in a God way!

Listen, if you want what normal people have, then by all means, go ahead and do what normal people do!

But if you want what too few people have – lives filled with the incomparable mercy and grace of God, lives marked by a genuine relationship with God – then we must be ready to do what too few people dare to do; embrace the weird! Be abnormally weird to the world... in a God way!