

GOD'S NEW NORMAL

A story that has dominated the news cycle for the last week or two has been the rescue of Jaycee Dugard from eighteen years of captivity. When she was eleven, convicted sex offender Phillip Garrido and his wife kidnaped her from a bus stop while Jaycee's step-dad frantically tried to chase down Garrido's car. Then she disappeared. Nothing more was heard from Jaycee until police investigators followed new suspicions of Garrido and discovered the long lost child—now a young woman.

Jaycee was forced to live in a backyard tent, cut off from the rest of the world. She bore her captor two children and in eighteen years had never been to a doctor or a dentist. Whatever schooling she may have received came from Garrido and his wife.

And then, suddenly, dramatically, she was set free and reunited with her family.

The story is both heartening and heartbreaking. And it isn't over. Can you imagine what it must be like for Jaycee to return home after eighteen years with a twisted man? Eighteen birthdays have not been celebrated. She missed her education, and normal adolescent opportunities for social development. There were no proms, no graduations, no college—none of the usual things we take for granted. She feels incredible guilt and shame for having bonded with her captor. In the strange ways our minds work, Jaycee adapted to her situation as a kind of survival skill. She has two children for whom she is responsible. She has lived more of her life as a victim than as a loved child with her birth family.

And then, in one fateful moment, she was rescued from the squalor of a tent and returned to the safety and comfort of her middle-class home.

Jaycee will have to adjust to a new normal. We look at her old life in captivity and shake our heads in amazement. That was her old normal. She is having reacquaint herself to a way of living most of us simply assume. The transition will take time, patience, and a whole bunch of love.

Jaycee's tragic story illustrates something of what it must be like from God's perspective when people like us are born again into his family through personal faith in Jesus. All our lives we were held spiritually captive by the Evil One. We grew up with the distortions and abnormalities of a rebel existence, alienated from God. It was all we knew. No matter what our life looked like to others, God looked down from heaven and saw us living in the squalor of this world.

And then, by a miracle of God's grace, the light of the gospel pierced the blindness of our hearts. We saw our brokenness, our sinfulness, confessed our guilt and trusted Jesus to rescue us—and he did.

The transformation was stunning, especially for those coming to faith later in life. The Bible likens it to walking out of thick darkness and stepping in brilliant light. There is an initial rush of excitement to realize that the nightmare of spiritual captivity is over, our guilt has been forgiven. We have become God's kids, members of his family.

But God's new normal takes a lifetime of getting used to. After a while we begin to feel its strangeness. We discover that we have familiar ties with our old way of life that still tug at our

hearts. Acting like Jesus feels awkward. We realize that acclimating ourselves to life with God means we're in for a long obedience in the same direction. We have been forever changed, but transitioning into the new normal will take time and effort.

We have spent the past eight weeks describing what we have called *Uncommon Virtues*: selflessness, forgiveness, contentment, discernment, self-control, acceptance, love for enemies (mercy), and kindness. They are certainly uncommon in the context of our old, pre-Christian way of life. They are frequently uncommon in our new, net-yet-glorified families of faith. From the perspective of heaven, they are simply normal. Those creatures who live and move before God's throne—angels and archangels, Cherubim and Seraphim, Elders and the spirits of righteous people made perfect—these all find what we call 'uncommon' virtues ordinary—it's simply how things are.

When I was in Bible College I was required to read a book whose title stuck with me longer than the contents: *God's Provision For Normal Christian Living*, by Dr. Robert Ketcham.

In the Forward to the book, Dr. Ketcham describes why he chose the title. He decided against a phrase popular then: *God's Provision For Victorious Christian Living*. He writes: "...the term [victorious] denotes some high state of piety obtainable by only a few of God's chosen saints. They are sure that a life of daily victory for them is beyond all hope." And then he adds, "The *average* Christian life is not the *normal* Christian life."

Far too many Christians settle for average. The tugs of the old life are too seductive and the disciplines necessary for the new life too challenging and restrictive. So they acculturate themselves to their church families by getting rid of their more egregious sins. They aren't bad people, but neither are they pursuing holiness. They aren't living with Jesus. They settle far short of what God considers normal. They are average Christians.

We talked briefly last week about spiritual counterfeits. Normal Christian living has a counterfeit too. Some substitute spiritualized conversation for authentic transformation. They spew superficial, pious God-talk that is really annoying. It's kind of like eating sugar lumps with honey. That's not normal.

The Apostle Paul described normal Christian living this way: "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude [inner landscape; disposition] of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:21-24).

Paul describes a spiritual renovation process in which we consciously turn away from our old normal—our old sinful attitudes and habits. We say no to what was once normal for us.

For instance, before I met Jeannette, I was what you might call a casual housekeeper. (You might actually have called me a slob.) There was a place for dirty clothes and it encompassed the whole floor. All horizontal surfaces were appropriate places to put my stuff. My living spaces needed hazmat warnings.

By contrast, Jeannette is neat and tidy, a careful homemaker. When we got married, I discovered that I needed to "put off my old bachelor self." My pre-marriage life didn't mesh with my new married normal. I had to say no to old, undisciplined habits. Instead of dropping my stuff wherever I happened to be at the moment, I had to put it where it belonged.

Part of what made that work was the realization that I really liked my new bride and I wanted to please her. I discovered that an orderly environment was good for her, and what was good for her became good for me. I learned to like a clean house. My thinking about how and why to care for my things was undergoing a change.

You see, just saying no to sin is only the first step. We have to reprogram our internal self. Our minds have a predisposition to selfishness and independence. They have been spiritually formed by a rebel world led by a dark lord. We are conditioned to find satisfaction and meaning out of things and people, pleasure and experiences—the stuff of this present existence. In our warped, pre-Christian thinking, God is an obstacle who gets in the way of us getting what we want.

When we come to faith, our minds need renewing. We have to learn to think differently, clearly, rightly, biblically, spiritually. We have “to be made new in the attitude of our minds.”

Again, think of the process Jaycee Dugard will have to go through in order to enjoy her new normal. She has to reorient her mind to her true identity. She has to let go of false guilt. She needs a values transformation, sloughing off eighteen years of twisted thinking and recovering the family values of her true home.

Living in God’s normal means adapting our minds to God’s reality: learning God’s character; leaning on God’s unfailing love and faithfulness; learning to love what is truly right and just and good; letting God’s Spirit re-form our minds with the mind of Christ.

And with that come new obediences. Paul describes it as “...putting on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” We clothe ourselves with Jesus and act like him in our attitudes and actions. We cultivate new habits which include, among other things, the uncommon virtues we have been studying, so that what was uncommon for us becomes common—our new normal.

Last week we said that not being unkind is not the same as being kind. Not being unkind is what average Christians settle for. Putting on the new man—clothing ourselves with Jesus—describes positive acts of kindness: gracious courtesy and generosity.

The same is true of all the uncommon virtues we looked at. They help us define life in God’s new normal. It is only from the limited and distorted perspective of this world that such virtues are uncommon—sometimes rare. For those who follow Jesus, they aren’t out of reach, they aren’t extraordinary. They’re God’s new normal.

Over lunch Friday Jeannette and I were talking about the incredible strength, speed and athleticism of professional football players. These guys are dedicated, disciplined and finely coached. They also have something most of us will never have: a naturally athletic body.

I played center for Sparta High School’s varsity football team. We had one guy on the line bigger than me. I anchored the line at 170 pounds. I may have been light, but I was slow.

I never entertained the dream of playing at a higher level. I didn’t have the physical equipment.

We sometimes feel that spiritually. We’re not extraordinarily gifted for preaching, or leading, or teaching, or directing worship. We’re ordinary, average Christians. So we never aspire to significant spiritual growth. We can’t envision ourselves uncommonly virtuous. We don’t have the stuff.

Listen, we have the Spirit of the living God living inside us. We have all we need to be all God wants us to be. We may never preach like Billy Graham, or lead like Bill Hybels, or plant churches like cross-cultural missionaries. But when it comes to being like Jesus, we all can be uncommon—what God calls normal.

So don’t settle for average. Don’t believe the lie that uncommon virtues are for uncommon saints. Don’t be disheartened thinking that you don’t have what it takes to be kind, merciful, accepting, self-controlled, discerning, content, forgiving, and selfless.

The Holy Spirit of Christ lives in you. “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life” (2 Pet. 1:3). So be normal. Be uncommon.