



1200 Lexington Road
Wilmore, KY 40390

Pastor Daryl Diddle

(859) 858-3521
office@wfmc.net

“Art”

Sermon Series: “Changed World Because of Jesus,” No. 6

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Philippians 4:4-9

4 Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! 5 Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

8 And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

9 Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.

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[holds up sign]



Changed World Because of Jesus.

How the life of just one person...the life of Jesus...changed our world; that's what we've been looking at these past weeks...specifically about how Jesus' presence has transformed things like:

- **masculinity**— the very definition of **manhood**,
- the value of **children**,
- the **breadth** of human **compassion**,
- our understanding of both earthly and heavenly **kingdoms**...

Last Sunday we looked at how Jesus transformed the importance our world places on **education**.

We'll wrap up next week looking at how He's affected our concept of **civilization**.

Today, I'd like us to consider how Jesus has influenced **art** in our world.

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Now...art, like most things dealing with aesthetics, can often be misunderstood and hard to pin down.

Sometimes in Christian culture, art has been seen as superfluous...needless excess. In fact, our own theological tradition has often minimized art in the name of either moral or financial responsibility, claiming that things should be as basic as possible so that money might be used for greater goods than, as some would say, “just making things pretty.”

And at some level, that is valid. Considering the overwhelming human need in our world, it's hard to justify spending a thousand dollars on, say, a *lamp* when a twenty dollar lamp will light up the room just as well.

At the same time though, some people have made thrift into it's own god...taking great pride – a very conceited, ungodly pride, in, not only how, frankly, *cheap* they are, *personally*, but in the way they tell others how they ought to *live* and *spend* and *give* their money.

And so at least some of how we see art and beauty has to do with our personal motivation and calling.

Is the person who truly follows God's call to give her life to creating a great masterpiece for His glory...is she better or worse than the person who follows God's call to give themselves to feeding the poor in Haiti?

Of course, the key here is...are we honestly doing as God is calling us to do? Are we truly following His Spirit's leading...or are we just doing what we want?

That's why it's so critical for Christ-followers to be able to hear, and then be willing to honestly follow, the leading of God's Holy Spirit in our lives. He calls us to different things for the sake of His glory.

Of course, we all see the importance in feeding hungry children in Haiti for God's glory.

Yet we also have to remember that *God* sees the importance in creating and valuing beauty and art for His glory. We actually see that in God's character from the very beginning.

I mean, who can deny that God built tremendous beauty into our world even as He made it? He built beauty and creativity and harmony into every living and non-living thing. He used art and design and color and materials of nearly endless varieties.

Had God only been interested in *function*, He could have used *far less* of *all* those things than He did. Our world could be *square* and *flat* and *black* and *white*. But the fact that it *isn't* speaks loudly about God's interest in art.

And God not only built beauty, He commanded that beauty be built into the things He told people to create.

He built beauty into the tabernacle.

He built beauty into the Temple.

He built beauty into His people...

into civilization...

into the way we're to relate with one another.

He built beauty into language,

into music,  
into relationships,  
into governance,  
into foreign affairs,  
into how business is done, and,  
into our conceptions of quality and worth.

He built the desire to build beauty into us.

The fact is, all things that God does...He does with a beauty and a fluidity and a natural rightness in mind which clearly tell us...God appreciates beauty.

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Now, that's not to say we always have to use thousand-dollar lamps.

But that *is* to say that, since God Himself occasionally used one, we can't automatically reject them as ungodly.

In the way we think, we have to take into serious account God's appreciation of beauty and art and quality.

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We talked about a lot of that sort of stuff...making a case for the validity of art and beauty...about a year ago in a morning message series.

Today, I want to consider how Jesus...in His life and purpose...took God's already existing appreciation of art and not only clarified it, but wound up supercharging it in our world.

Part of that He did explicitly.

Jesus often taught lessons based in the beauty of the natural world...probably the most obvious is His mentioning the beauty of the lilies of the field and His comment about how King Solomon, with all his wealth and glory, didn't even compare to them.

Jesus' whole point of that being...if God is willing to beautify...to such an extreme degree...a *plant* that only lives for a *day*, then how much *more* will God help and keep and provide for us...we who are the very pinnacles of His eternal creation.<sup>1</sup>

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Jesus also accepted from someone a costly and unnecessary, but beautiful gift of perfume...and in response to that whole event, Scripture condemns the one who expressed that that gift should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

You see, there is a place for beauty in Jesus' life.²

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In fact, Jesus' own parables are considered works of art in their own right as stories that convey deep truths in ways that anyone can understand.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:27

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:10

Today we might say, “Man, no one can tell a story like Jesus! No one can communicate like Jesus! I could listen to Him all day!”

Well, that is an absolute art.

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Jesus also explicitly prized the beauty of the godly soul; He said that the person who pursues Him and lives as God says to live has a beauty about them that is unable to be replicated or approximated outwardly.

In other words, Jesus says that people should both *prioritize* and *pursue* the sort of beauty that really matters...that lasts for eternity.³

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In all this, Jesus struck a balance in appreciating beauty of all kinds while also recognizing that true beauty begins on the inside of persons with how they reflect God, and He admits that the sort of art that comes out of people who know and love God is the highest and best that art can possibly be, because it's birthed out of principles that are *truly...implicitly right* and *good* and *pure*...principles that reflect God's own character.

So, Jesus' life, in all those ways, speaks explicitly of the importance He gave to art and beauty.

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But you know, it seems to me that Jesus' biggest contribution to art came *implicitly*...in the way His own life inspired art in the lives of His followers, which makes perfect sense when you think about it.

When an artist sees a beautiful sunset – something with colors that, in their mind, just approach perfection, they are moved to capture it in some way...to take a picture of it, or to paint it or to write a poem or song about it.

When we see, what seems to be the perfect mountain or field or ocean or stream...when we see the beauty of the horse or lion, the oak or orchid, the man or woman, the artists among us are moved to capture it somehow.

There's something inside the artists' being that wants to celebrate the beauty they experience by reproducing it in some limited, human way...so others might get the glimpse of the beauty that they've gotten.

That's what artists do.

Well, when the absolute perfection of God comes to earth in the person of Jesus...when an artist is confronted with, not just a sunset or an orchid, but with the One who, Himself, *created* those things in their beauty, of *course* that artist is moved to celebrate that, to reproduce that, to try to interpret that so as many as possible can share in it's *intrinsic* beauty...in *His intrinsic* beauty.

And *this* is why *Jesus, implicitly*...just by His existence on earth...inspires an *unending* flow of art.

Wherever in the world Jesus has been known...art that speaks and sings and imagines Him has just burst out of people...and it keeps on coming...since there really is no end to His beauty and perfection.

It's so ironic that the prophet Isaiah wrote about Jesus,

³ Matthew 6:5; Mark 12:28

“There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance to attract us to him.”⁴

He looked, for all the world, like the typical, ancient near easterner.

But...how He ***lived***, what He ***said***, what He ***stood*** for...His ***wisdom*** and ***compassion*** and ***love*** and ***power*** has caused an unending outpouring of art.

It's also remarkably ironic that our own culture has so fixed it's concept of value and beauty on what things ***look*** like...when Jesus – the one who inspired nearly all the world's most significant and important art – we don't even know for sure what He looked like.

That's because it's that true, deeper beauty of Jesus that's inspired the art; and the art created in Jesus' name has changed the world.

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Of course, in her first 300 years or so, the Church was just trying to survive from one persecution to the next. So I suppose it's not super surprising that very little art has been discovered from that time.

But once Constantine legalized Christianity in 313, Christian art, and especially church architecture, rose up almost overnight.<sup>5</sup>

Churches were built differently than any other even religious building, because the builders recognized that they were not built to house an earthly god, like nearly all other religious buildings. Church buildings were being built to honor a God that is not of this world...so how do you even approach representing perfection in the realm of the imperfect?

That is the struggle of every Christian artist – whether they are creating a building or a painting or a song or something else...and that's why the world's cathedrals are among the greatest works of art ever produced.

It's why we all were shocked a few years ago when Notre Dame burned, and why it was so important to the French people to rebuild it.

Yes, there was politics and pride and money involved in that decision, but there was something more that any Christian with the slightest inclination to art felt: the tragedy that beauty that honored God had been destroyed.

I might also mention...this is exactly why Christians oppose abortion and murder and abuse and neglect and prejudice against people: human beings are made in God's image, and when something that speaks so strongly of God is desecrated or destroyed, it should be tragic to us, and if it's not, there's something missing inside us.

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The renaissance – the 13th through the 17th centuries was, arguably, the golden age of art, and the art of that time was absolutely loaded with Biblical themes and motifs.⁶ Those days gave us the works of Michelangelo, Raphael, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Veronese [veh ruh neez] VanDerWeyden, Botticelli, Rubens, Velazquez and hundreds of others. Some of them not even Christians, but Jesus and the Scriptures still dominated their art.

⁴ Isaiah 53:2

⁵ Janson, H. and J. Kerman. A History of Music and Art. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. P.41.

⁶ Kennedy, D. James. What If Jesus Had Never Been Born? Thomas Nelson, Nashville. P.176.

Historian Thomas Howard says, “Christianity and art were causally linked between the fourth and the twentieth centuries,”⁷ and the fact is, even as the more recent past has drifted away from being *overtly* Christian, much of it’s art still refers, in some way, to Christianity, even in it’s intentional attempt to be something different.

The hold that Jesus has...still...on art in our world is truly remarkable.

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We see the very same sort of hold in literature.

From Dante to Chaucer, from John Donne (Dun) to Dostoevsky, from Shakespeare to Bunyan to Milton to Dickens to Tolstoy to Anderson, Elliott, Lewis, Sayers, O’Conner and Solzhenitsyn, nearly all of the greatest works of literature in the world have been either inspired by...or have addressed...or both...Jesus.

Even great writers like Melville or Hemingway – who were not supposedly Christians – included Christ figures in their works.

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The same is true in the world of music.

Of course the music of the early church had it’s roots in that of Jewish Temple worship – the poems and songs from the synagogues.

Through the years, as the liturgy of worship was regulated by the Roman Catholics, the music of the ***Church*** really became the music of the culture...especially under Pope Gregory the First...Gregory the Great.

During that time, music was used to carry God’s word, and mostly in chant.

But about the year 1000, a Christian monk – Guido of Arezzo – created musical notation, and that invention freed music from oral tradition, much like an alphabet frees language. Because of notation, music could now be composed and exist outside the performance. Notation allowed for the rules of logic and timing. It’s because of notation that we have melodies and harmonies that can be replicated and developed.

And since, not all, but nearly all music that’s been preserved is from the Church, we can say that music as we know it today, especially in the Global West, is a product of the Church.

Of course the greatest of musicians – people like Handel, Vivaldi, Beethoven, Haydn (HY dunn), Mendelssohn, Mozart, Chopin, Wagner (VOG ner), Brahms...the names even non-musical people recognize...they were all Christians and their music reflects their faith.

Of course...Bach, though, would be the most prominent.

Most music critics would say Bach is the greatest musician who ever lived and most consider him the father of classical and modern music. A deeply faith-filled person, Bach left something of Jesus in every piece he created.

So it’s no exaggeration to say that, apart from Jesus, music as we know it would simply not exist.

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<sup>7</sup> Howard, Thomas. Christianity and The Arts,” in Dowley, ed. A Lion Handbook – the History of Christianity. Lion Hudson, Chicago. P.37.

It's been said that Bach is to music what Shakespeare is to literature what either DiVinci or Michelangelo is to art. These are, by most accounts, the absolute greatest at what they did...and could it possibly be just coincidence that all of them were Christians? No way.

And you know, even with the art of motion pictures...which is one of the most secular art forms simply because it's come of age in a largely post-Christian culture, some of the greatest, most memorable and most celebrated films...like Ben Hur, It's a Wonderful Life, The Sound of Music, A Man For All Seasons, Chariots of Fire...they all point directly to Jesus.

It was over 30 years ago now that film critic Michael Medved noted, "Hollywood makes many films that are anti-religious, yet invariably these flop in the box office. On the other hand, when they make films dealing with religion in a positive way, they are often surprise box office hits."<sup>8</sup> That is still very true today.

[holds up sign for emphasis]



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The Philippian church faced persecution from outside and a lack of unity within. They were fixated on their own suffering and their need for personal power and control in order to push back on those who were making life hard for them.

And of course – they were not the last people to fixate on their own suffering.

The Apostle Paul knew very well that if we allow ourselves to get caught up in that sort of hardship and negativity, all that will happen is...we will spiral further down and become the ugliest versions of ourselves.

So what should we do?

Paul writes there in verse 4,

“Be full of joy and considerate in the way you treat others, and don’t worry about things – just tell God what you need and thank Him for all He’s done.”

How do you do that?

You change your fixation.

Instead of focusing on the hard and difficult things of life, Paul says in verse 8 there,

“Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right and pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”

That's what the art that has come from God through the Church has done for the world: it's put the beauty of God into forms that we can put into our minds...and dwell on...keep there...at **all** times, but **especially** in difficult times.

That's why the world needs art, and that's why Christianity has dominated the arts. In a broken world, we need God's beauty to stay buoyant, to be lifted up, to think rightly...with right perspective, so we can become the people God made us to be.

Jesus' coming gave us the material we needed, and He has kept beauty on display ever since...the very beauty of God...beauty upon which we can fix our minds and hearts.

⁸ Medved, Michael. Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values. Zondervan, Grand Rapids. 1992. pp. 63-76.

And the world has.

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Listen, if life has been hard for you, for whatever reason, God offers you Himself. God offers you His own beauty in it's highest form...His Son, Jesus.

Fix your eyes on Him, and He and the beauty made in His image will turn your vision, and your heart, around. That is what Paul says and asks us to do as we see the beauty and the art of God.

**Prayer:**

We thank you, Lord, for all the different ways that you have created beauty in our world. We thank you that you value it. We thank you, Jesus that you have dominated it.

And we pray that we be faithful in making the art that we are called to make so that your world might see your beauty in us and in the different things we produce.

Lord, thank you. You didn't have to do things the way that you did ... but you did. And we are grateful. We are richer The world is richer because you did. In Jesus's name. Amen

**Closing Song:** "Lavish Love, Abundant Beauty"

**Closing Word and Benediction:**

Psalm 50:2 says, ***"From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth."***

May the beauty of God shine forth from us...in the art we make and in the art we live...as we live our lives after Jesus. May all that we are point a broken world to it's Savior.

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Thanks for coming to worship today. The Lord bless and keep you. Amen

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