

**The Way of Jesus: Salt and Light**  
**Matthew 5:13-16**

**Introduction – Are Your Eyes Open?**

Have you noticed? We are a year and a half out from the national presidential election and things are already starting to heat up. The Republicans have at least two of a very large field of candidates who have formally announced their intentions. On the Democratic side, we have what seems to be a presumptive nominee but with many people seeking to derail her. It is a political season. I don't know what list I signed, but it seems as if I receive at least ten political emails a day. In an increasingly divided society, it seems as if politics has become our national sport.

But beyond the political polarization and posturing we have much deeper problems. Our unmanageable national debt, to be sure, is one of them. National security and the ever-present threat of terrorism is another. But even deeper and, I believe, at the root of our biggest problems is America's decent into moral bankruptcy. Forty years ago, we debated situational ethics. That question has been settled. In our culture today, everyone feels justified in doing what seems good for them and right in their own eyes. Thirty years ago, we protested the murder of unborn children through abortion. Murdering infants in the womb is now an established and unquestioned right according to liberal progressives. (I don't believe God will hold us unaccountable for that great sin.) Twenty years ago the internet made its debut and was granted full and unregulated acceptance. Today, pornography websites far outnumber any other kind on the internet. Our society has seemingly discovered a way to distort the wonderful gift of sexuality without consequence. We are deceived. There are consequences. Ten years ago, the law of the land declared that marriage was between one woman and one man. Today, the biblical and traditional view of marriage is under serious assault.

There's a lot of "end-of-the-world" talk among Christians. More and more prophetic books are being written. There is greater interest in the study of the book of Revelation. There is a high level of expectation that things will only get worse. Strangely, some Christians welcome the world's decline because they believe it will hasten the return of Christ.

We have to be careful if we begin to think in those ways. We do not know when Christ will return. He might return at any time. We must always be ready. But we cannot be callous or cynical about our culture's decline. To be of that mind would be against all the teaching of the New Testament. You see, God loves the world...so much so that he gave his only begotten Son. You know that verse. (John 3:16)

We think we have it tough and we do. But our situation is no worse than the culture in which the church flourished during its first three hundred years. In fact, many of those Christians died for their testimony. And yet, they radically challenged and changed their culture for the better. How did they do it? Our calling is the same as theirs: the words and the way of Jesus:

### **Text – Matthew 5:13-16**

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

### **Salt & Light**

I've been encouraged to consider more topical preaching rather than systematic teaching through a biblical book or lengthy passage. There is a lot to commend topical preaching and there is a place for it. But part of the long-term value of expositional preaching (which is what we're doing through the Sermon on the Mount) is that it teaches us how to study God's Word together and it helps us to see how biblical principles build together on each other. Some folks struggle to understand how the Bible goes together. They get this idea and that. They know this doctrine and another. But they don't get the whole picture. Studying the Scriptures systematically reinforces a holistic understanding of God's Word – how it all goes together. And – don't miss this – it's another reason for you and your family to be consistent in your attendance at church.

The word pictures of salt and light that Jesus uses here are naturally tied to the beatitudes that we just studied. Salt and light refer to the role we are to have with a decaying and dark world. The beatitudes – poor in spirit, mourning your sins and those of the world, meekness, thirst for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and perseverance under persecution – are the character traits of those who follow Jesus. Put another way: Salt and light refer to the job description; the beatitudes are the qualifications.

<p><b>Now Calling: Jesus Followers</b></p>
<p><b>Job Description:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be salt to arrest the moral decay of the culture.</li> <li>• Reflect the light of Jesus to illuminate moral darkness.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Qualifications:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Humble</li> <li>• Grieving over sin</li> <li>• Gentle</li> <li>• Passion for righteousness</li> <li>• Merciful to others</li> <li>• Single minded pursuit of God</li> <li>• Brings people together</li> <li>• Perseverance under persecution</li> </ul>

In these few verses, Jesus tells us something about his followers and the world that is so obvious that it is often overlooked. **The church and the world are two distinctly different communities.**

The world is rotting away. It is putrefying. It can't help it. It's going bad. When Jesus told his followers that they were the salt of the earth, he was referring to the preservative quality of salt. Of course, in the ancient world, there was no refrigeration. In order for meat to be kept for any length of time, salt had to be thoroughly rubbed into it. When treated in that way, it could almost last indefinitely. It is powerful picture of the role Jesus' followers would play and can play in arresting the natural moral decay of the world. Believers, by their moral purity and integrity, are integrated into the sinews and muscles of society and in that way, turn it from its natural path of moral decay. I'll give you a simple example. My first job was working as a dishwasher in the

kitchen of a family restaurant. Well, the serving area was family oriented, but the back room certainly wasn't. Foul language and jokes were the main course on the conversation menu. I didn't participate. I got a bit of jeering, but held my integrity. I also worked very hard and became a valued employee. I was outspoken about my faith, though not obnoxious. Over time, the language and conversation topics changed. In fact, if they let a swear word fly while I was working, they apologized. I don't give you a personal example to trumpet my virtues. I'm no different than you. But I was able to see firsthand how the presence of a Jesus-follower could change the whole moral environment of a workplace. I suspect many of you have seen the same thing.

Jesus doesn't just tell us to be salt. He also warns us to retain our preservative qualities – our saltiness. Sodium chloride – common salt – is a very stable compound. Left to itself, it does not lose its “saltiness.” What did Jesus mean? Salt loses its preservative quality when it becomes contaminated by other things like sand, dust, or other chemicals. It's only good then to be thrown on the footpath to keep the weeds down. The church loses its ability to prevent moral decay when it becomes too much like the world. Salt always burns. It must always have its tang. The world, in its race to rottenness, is not going to like the moral stand of Jesus's followers. We must guard our moral integrity and authority. We must be pure. We must be righteous. (Remember the beatitudes?) And we must speak out. I like what John Stott wrote: “God intends us to penetrate the world. Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars. Our place is to be rubbed into the secular community”<sup>1</sup> We cannot lose our saltiness or we are good-for-nothing.

The world is not only decaying, it is also in darkness. In our modern electric society, we really hardly have a clue what that means. Many of you, I'm sure, have been to some state or national cave where they've turned the lights off and you can't see your hand in front of your face. That's darkness. In Jesus' day, they didn't have the light pollution that we have with all of our electric lights. But just a little bit of light from a small oil lamp in a very dark place would chase the darkness away. Even a city illuminated by those simple oil lamps could be seen from miles away if it was set on any kind of hill.

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<sup>1</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 65.

If salt is our Christian character, then the light is our good works done in Jesus' name in Jesus' way. It's very simple really. God intended for people who are made in his image to live a certain way. But sin – rebellion against God and his ways – has distorted everything. People don't naturally know how to live God's way. They are disoriented about life – wandering around in the darkness of confusion. But the actions of the person who is following Jesus will show, just as light dispels the darkness – the kind of life that all people were created to live. And when Jesus's followers do these good things it reflects back to God who made us. Jesus told us to let God's life be shown in us through the things that we do so that people will see it and glorify our Father in heaven. Christians have a long heritage of good works that have made the world better: hospitals, schools, the abolition of slavery, advancement of civil rights in this country, and the church is leading the way in the fight against sexual trafficking. Jesus said very clearly: “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8). Hymn writer Henry Smart put it this way:

*Lead on, O King Eternal, till sin's fierce war shall cease,  
And holiness shall whisper the sweet Amen of peace;  
For not with swords loud clashing, nor roll of stirring drums,  
With deeds of love and mercy the heav'nly kingdom comes.*

### **One Pressing Issue**

We are to be salt – courageous to stand against the moral decay of our society – and light – showing the fullness of human potential through the good works that we do. I want to speak briefly about one issue that is becoming more and more pressing each day. We cannot hide. We cannot cower in isolation. I believe if we are to be a preservative in this culture, we need to rise up and speak up, even though we will be opposed, ridiculed, and perhaps even persecuted for doing so.

I'm speaking of the issue of marriage and the pressure to redefine it by the LGBT community. A couple of weeks ago Indiana passed a law protecting the freedom of religious expression by business owners. It was legislation instituting a law that is similar to those of most of the states in our country. It protected freedom for business owners who might decline to offer services for something that would violate their conscience. I'm convinced Indiana passed the law because

we have seen in the last few years business owners who have been forced to close because they refused to bake a cake or take pictures for a homosexual wedding. For them, doing so would have constituted affirmation of an action – the joining of a homosexual couple in marriage – that is contrary to their religious beliefs. The state courts, in those situations, forced them to offer services against their conscience. Indiana’s law was designed to protect the business owners.

By the reaction of the media and many others, one would have thought that Indiana was reinstating segregation laws! Businesses threatened to pull their interests out of the state. Even some mainstream denominations put up a howl.

Friends, this issue is complex. And it is very easy to become reactionary. On the other hand, it is very tempting to hide. We can afford neither. We must act with Jesus’ character – the qualities of the beatitudes - with humility, meekness, and mercy. We must act with grace. But we must also bring truth. We cannot be quiet lest we lose our saltiness. In the next few weeks, the definition of marriage in this country will be decided by the Supreme Court. I would encourage you to pray and fast for the Court in this very critical issue. So much of this issue revolves around the definition of marriage. Further, I would encourage you to speak out – always with grace and mercy in Jesus’ name – on traditional marriage and homosexuality as you have opportunity. I have determined that I will do so when those opportunities are presented to me. I regret the opportunities that I’ve missed because I was timid. You and I can no longer afford to do that. We cannot lose our saltiness.

But I also realize that there is a lot of insecurity about addressing the issue of homosexuality. It is a powerful social tidal wave that has been building for years in our culture and is about to inundate us – if it has not already done so. I promise you that we will find a way to equip you with biblical answers to the challenge that has been put before us by the LGBT community. But we will do it Jesus’ way: with grace and truth.

### **Will You Follow Jesus?**

Two thousand years ago, Jesus gave these words to a rag-tag bunch of Palestinian people on hillside in Galilee. They were a religious and ethnic minority who were despised by the rest of the world. But with Jesus’ way and with his words, they turned a decaying and dark world

upside down. Our calling is the same as theirs. We are to be salt and light in our culture that is decaying and darkening more and more each day. The terrible days in which we live present an opportunity to make a real difference. It's one thing to talk about it and get all inspired; it's better to do it. I've got an assignment for you:

- Look in your world – it could be family, work/school, or community – in which you can be a moral preservative. Identify a moral concern and either speak out about it or let your actions speak against it. For example, I will try to reply to FaceBook posts about homosexual or marriage issues in a biblical and redemptive way. I've missed many opportunities because it was just a lot easier to be quiet.
- Look for a way in which you do something that reflects the way of Jesus – a good work. We have a lot of those things going on. Six of us go over and mentor needy children at Lincoln School each week. We are a small, but redemptive presence on that campus and especially in the lives of those children. We've seen real changes. A small group of ladies meet nearly every week to bring together their prayers shawls which are shared with people in deep need. They've been doing that now for over two years and well over two hundred prayer shawls have been made and shared with hurting people and families. There are many other good things happening that are beyond a church program. Let your light shine! Look for a good thing to do that would show how a real Jesus follower leads their life.

Church family, you know that we are in a dynamic season. There is a lot going on. In a few moments, we will have a quarterly business meeting in which we will discuss an important staffing question. Pastor Knute is returning to be salt and light in the public schools and we need to address the big hole that he will be leaving for ministry leadership. This last week, the property team met and they are proposing some very aggressive actions that will refresh our building. Exciting times!

The temptation for us is to focus inward. Staffing, programs, buildings – all of these bring excitement and tension. It will be very easy for us get focused on ourselves. Jesus gave us a mandate to engage with the world. I have thought and prayed a lot about the church. It is 24/7 with me – as it is with any pastor. I am convinced of this:

**The way forward is outward.**

I'm pretty good at self-pity. If they gave out honorary degrees in that discipline, I'm sure I would be a candidate. Don't be so modest. Some of you are right there with me. But too much self-focus quickly turns to sickness. I have found – to my constant joy – that the antidote to unhealthy self-focus is service to others. When I used to teach children, it would frequently happen. I'd start the day in some sort of funk for some stupid reason, but I couldn't stay there. Invariably, I'd have to help some child. It was always a ready cure.

It is the same with us. We need to address staffing issues. We need refreshment in the building and in our programs. But if we focus solely on ourselves, we will become sick. Say it with me:

**The way forward is outward.**

It's not just in programs, but in the way that each of us engages with our world. Be salt. Be light. This is the way of blessing. This is the way that will glorify God. Because this is the way of Jesus.