November 1, 2015

“Salt and Light”

Matthew 5:13-16

**FCF**: Desire for change. But confused as to how.

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus intends for His followers to have a powerful influence on the world.

(magnet) We need to embrace that vision – both the end and the means.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Wherever you are on the political spectrum, most would agree that things are not the way they should be. Everywhere we turn, we see violence and injustice, apathy and greed, corruption and waste. And what do our leaders often offer up? Divisive quarrels and half-baked solutions.

Understandably, many long for change. And are willing to get involved so as to have an impact and make a difference. But how? How do we do go about this in a meaningful way?

Let me suggest that a real revolution demands a revolutionary way of doing things, an utterly new approach. So perhaps we need to consider the way Jesus lays out for His followers.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:1-16

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Where are we in our series? Jesus, as the King, has come, proclaiming “the gospel of the kingdom” – the good news, the promise that the days of disease, emptiness, broken relationships, poverty, injustice**,** and racism are all giving way to peace, shalom. A revolution is underway.

What then would it mean to be citizens of such a kingdom? Jesus shows us in the Beatitudes, in vv.3-12. This is a list of character traits of His followers. They are all connected, meaning they are not haphazardly flung together but that there is a logical flow. And they are inclusive, meaning they are not isolated from each other but to be taken as a package deal.

To live this way, Jesus says, is to be noticed. Beatitudinal living is not natural. Nor is it normal. Those who live in this way will stand out. What will come of that? In some cases, a hostile reaction, persecution in some form, for the kingdom of Jesus and the kingdom of the world are opposed to each other. But besides the hostile reaction, such a life will also bring a wholesome influence, a powerful influence. Jesus, in fact, intends for His followers to have a powerful influence on the world. We need to embrace that vision – both the end and the means.

And this is where we see Jesus’ brilliance as a teacher. He teaches us these profound realities, gives us this grand vision, using the simplest of metaphors – everyday salt and light.

1. **SALT – HINDERING DECAY**

First, the salt (READ Matthew 5:13). Part of our influence in society is to hinder decay.

1. *Astonishing Calling*

Which is an astonishing calling. Think with me. As you read through the Beatitudes, you might ask, “*What good could such people do? Wouldn’t they simply be overwhelmed?*”

1. The metaphor

In modern times, we think of salt as being for seasoning, something we keep in a saltshaker. But in ancient times, salt was not just for seasoning but for preserving. Keep in mind there were no refrigerators and ice was hard to come by. So salt was rubbed into meat to keep it from spoiling.

1. The meaning

What Jesus is saying is that the world and the church are two distinct communities. He stresses “*YOU are the salt of the earth*.” Meaning that, when each of these communities is true to itself, the world will tend to decay like rotting meat. And the church will serve to hinder that decay.

But let me go further. If we take Jesus at His word, this has to mean that the church is God’s gift to the world. And to shun or dismiss the church is then ultimately self-destructive to society.

1. *Obvious Condition*

That said, what must then be true of the church to have that kind of influence?

1. The metaphor

The salt must stay salty. Now, true salt cannot lose its saltiness. But the “salt” of that time was a white powder from the Dead Sea area mixed with both true salt and other things. The true salt could then be washed away. And what was left behind was pretty much good for nothing.

1. The meaning

The idea being that the church must remain distinct. It must not be assimilated and contaminated by the culture around it. We are to be, as is often said, “*in the world but not of the world*.”

We are the salt of the earth – an astonishing calling with obvious conditions.

*Application:*

This is who we are and how we are to understand our calling. We are to be like salt, pressed and rubbed into the meat so as to hinder its decay. We are to be speaking the truth and living out the truth. Even when that truth is spurned. Even when it bites, which salt tends to do.

And, with that, we need to be aware of the danger of losing our saltiness, aware of the temptation in our own lives of becoming “*in the world and of the world*,” of being influenced by what we’re to influence and corrupted by the very corruption we’re to resist and work against.

Jesus intends for His followers to have an influence on the world, to be salt.

1. **LIGHT – DISPELLING DARKNESS**

But that’s not all (READ Matthew 5:14-16). Our calling is not limited to hindering the decay. Jesus presses this even further and says we are also called to dispel the darkness.

1. *Astonishing Calling*

Again, this is an astonishing calling. What could such people, as described in the Beatitudes, hope to accomplish in this cold, hard world? Wouldn’t they be too weak and feeble?

1. The metaphor

In modern times, we think of light and envision light switches and flashlights. Obviously, that wasn’t the case in ancient times. Jesus speaks here of “*a city set on a hill*,” alluding to white limestone walls gleaming in the sun. He speaks of lamps in the home, referring to small wicker oil lamps that were known to be most effective when set up on a stand so as to spread the light.

1. The meaning

Again, Jesus is saying there are these two distinct communities, the world and the church. And when each of these communities is true to itself, the world will be a dark place, however enlightened the world may declare itself to be. And the church will serve to dispel that darkness.

And let me again add this. Taking Jesus at His word, the church should be seen as God’s gift to the world. And it is a measure of the world’s darkness that it does not see the church that way.

1. *Obvious Condition*

Well, what must be true of the church to have that kind of influence in the world?

1. The metaphor

The light does no good if it remains hidden. We are not to be like a city cozily nestled in a valley, safely concealed from view. Nor are we to be like a lamp foolishly covered by a basket.

1. The meaning

The church must be visible. It must not be hidden or isolated from the culture around it. To turn that oft-used phrase, no, we must not be “of the world”. But we must still be “in it”.

Jesus says we are the light of the world – an astonishing calling with obvious conditions.

*Illustration:*

But it is so tempting to do otherwise. On my trip to Israel a few months ago, we toured up through the Dead Sea area and visited the remains of the Qumran community. This is where the Essenes settled, a Jewish group around the time of Jesus’ ministry. The Essenes were offended by the corruption they saw in the priests in Jerusalem and so settled in this wilderness.

They were committed to moral purity, true community, the study and preservation of sacred texts – all good things. It’s why we have the Dead Sea Scrolls. But the self-proclaimed “sons of light” did nothing to let that light shine. They hid themselves away. What of us?

*Application:*

Jesus said “*YOU are the light of the world*” – again, with that emphasis. “*This is who you are and what you are called to do*.” Let your light shine – your lives, your good works, to be seen by all that they might be drawn to your Father, the source of the light you are reflecting.

We are to speak and to live the truth. Not to conceal it. Not to pretend to be something we are not. We are to be willing to be the light we are, to be ourselves in this dark world.

And we must be aware of the temptation to hide the light, aware of the fear that can make us want to play it safe, aware of the desire to be liked at the expense of the call to love.

Jesus intends for His followers to have an influence on the world, to be salt and light.

**CONCLUSION:**

As I said earlier, no few of us have a sense things are not how they are supposed to be. So there is this good desire to change things, make an impact and a difference. But the problems are so great, so complicated. And we feel so insignificant. Where on earth do we start?

It starts with understanding how change will come. Not through more money and better strategies. Not by gaining control of the government, the institutions of higher learning, the arts and media outlets – though Christians are clearly called to such places. But ultimately, real change does not come that way but by our being “salt and light,” our living out the Beatitudes.

That’s how the change has and will come, by being salt and light through beatitudinal living. But how does that come? How can we live as citizens of this kingdom? Through embracing the gospel of the kingdom and giving ourselves to the rule and reign of the King. By understanding, acknowledging, embracing the finished work of Christ. And then following Him.

This is Christ’s vision for the world around us. And it needs to be ours as well.

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