

The Messiah on “Salt & Light”

Gratefully adapted from a sermon by David Ward @ Sermon Central.Com

In an episode from the 1960's classic, *The Andy Griffith Show*, while Sheriff Taylor is out of town, Barney Fife deputizes the local mechanic, Gomer Pyle, to walk patrols with him. As the two deputies are walking down the street one evening, they notice that someone is robbing the town's bank. They quickly duck behind a car; afraid and not knowing what to do. Finally, Gomer looks at Barney and says excitedly, "*Shazam! We need to call the police.*" In utter exasperation, Barney shoots back: "*We are the police!*"

We could say the same thing about the church. As we look around at what is happening in our world, we need to realize: "We're the ones who should do something!"

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden

Matthew 5:13-16

Notice that Jesus didn't say "you could be salt" or "what if you were light." He said, "You ARE the salt of the earth ... you ARE the light of the world."

Who is this "you" Jesus is talking to? His disciples; His followers; us.

The salt and light metaphors indicate our ability to influence the world for good.

Salt and light implies that we are here to be an influence for Christ

Yet the very notion that Christians can exert a healthy influence in the world might give us pause. As John Stott asked...

"What possible influence could the people described in the beatitudes exert in this hard, tough world? What lasting good can the poor and the meek do, the mourners and the merciful, and those who try to make peace not war? Would they simply be overwhelmed by the floodwaters of evil? What can they accomplish whose only passion is an appetite for righteousness, and whose only weapon is purity of heart? Are not such people too feeble to achieve anything, especially if they are a small minority in the world?"

Yes, in light of the countercultural perspectives that Jesus listed in the Beatitudes, it would be easy to assume that Jesus was calling His followers to come out of the world and live a sheltered or semi-monastic lifestyle, but with His very next thought Jesus proclaims precisely the opposite. Christians must permeate society as agents of redemption.

Writing to Philippian Christians, Paul urged them, *to be blameless and innocent ...*

Children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. Philippians 2:15

The world will undoubtedly persecute the church, yet it is the church's calling to serve this persecuting world with love and truth. Incredible as it may sound, Jesus referred to that handful of Palestinian peasants as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that's how far He intends our reach to be.

In the ancient world, salt was used primarily as a preservative and secondarily for flavoring; salt was a basic necessity of life. So when Jesus likened His disciples to salt, implicitly He was saying that apart from His disciples, the world would rot; but that Christians can delay that decay. In other words, if our lives conform to the norms of God's kingdom – as previously listed in the Beatitudes – we cannot help but be an influence for good in society, morally and spiritually.

The purpose of salt is to fight deterioration; therefore it must not itself deteriorate. The worse the world becomes and the more its corruption proceeds, the more it stands in need of Jesus' disciples. His reference to salt that "*has lost its taste*" reads more literally "*becomes tainted*." Salt can't actually become flavorless, but if gets cut (mixed in) with various impurities such as sand, it becomes useless as a preservative.

Also, with the phrase, "*thrown out and trampled underfoot*," I don't believe Jesus was making a statement about our salvation. Rather, He is referring to how the world would respond to Christians if we do not function as we should. Believers who fail to halt corruption become worthless as agents of change and redemption. **The church may make its peace with the world and avoid persecution, but it is thereby rendered impotent to fulfill its divinely ordained role.** It will thus ultimately be rejected even by those with whom it sought compromise. It doesn't matter which party--that's just how politics works.

Dennis Kinlaw, former Asbury Seminary professor and College president, tells a story about growing up in rural Lumberton North Carolina during the depression. It was Dennis' job, as a young boy, to rub salt into the meat his father brought home from hunting. He would rub salt into the meat until his young muscles ached. Finally, when it was thoroughly salted, He would hang it up in the storehouse.

One day company arrived, so Dennis' mother asked him to get some pork out of the storehouse. Dennis ran out, got a piece of pork off of a hook, and brought it into the kitchen. He laid it on his mother's cutting board and left the room. He was just about out the front door when heard his mother yell, "Dennis!"

Young Dennis knew from experience that whenever his mother screamed his name like that he was in trouble, so he slunk back to the kitchen and stood in the doorway afraid to go in.

Looking up at his mother from the doorway, he noticed she was not glaring at him but rather staring down at the meat. Dennis looked and noticed something unusual. He

said it was the first time in his life he ever saw meat move. Stepping closer, he noticed maggots pouring out of the slice his mother had made into the pork.

Dennis thought for sure he was going to get it. But all Mom said was, "*Not enough salt, Dennis. Not enough salt.*"

Now our tendency is to want to blame Hollywood, TV, liberal schooling, or the government for the decay of our culture. But maybe, just maybe, the real problem is "not enough salt." If we feel the world is decaying around us, the problem may very well be "not enough salt."

The second metaphor Jesus used to describe our Christian witness is "light." Christians are the light of the world — a world which our Bible describes as shrouded in thick darkness. Isaiah 9:2

Light is an powerful image. A light can be a warning, like a lighthouse. It can be an attraction, like a lighted window in the dark. It can be a guide like a flashlight. Above all, light is meant to be visible. You don't hide a lamp under a bucket; you raise it up high so people can see.

There is no excuse for secret discipleship. "*A city set on a hill cannot be hid.*" Likewise Christians who let their light shine before others cannot be hidden; and the light they shed dispels the darkness which would otherwise dominate.

Both of these metaphors of salt and light raise important questions about Christian involvement in society. We are not called to seize control of secular power structures; neither are we promised that by legislation we can Christianize the values of the world.

But we must remain active preservative agents, even irritants, in calling the world to heed God's standards. We dare not retreat into isolated Christian ghettos and ignore the world.

Richard Stearns, former president of World Vision, said: "The predicament of the American church is that we live in a kind of Magic Kingdom. Like going to Disneyland, you buy your ticket, and once you are inside the gates, everything you experience is controlled. The rides, the food, the shows are all there to entertain and amuse you. All you have to do is be there and enjoy.

Yet just beyond the walls of Disneyland is Anaheim and the rest of Los Angeles, including the streets of Compton. This is the real world with real problems: pollution and congestion, drugs and violence, islands of upscale neighborhoods surrounded by slums. But Inside the Magic Kingdom, this outside world is invisible and almost inconceivable.

As Christians, we too are tempted to see our world that way. We can start thinking that our job is to invite a few fortunate others into the theme park, away from the troubles outside. But our job is not to increase the attendance at Disneyland; it's to tear down the walls and transform the world outside.

We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. Salt is good for nothing if it's not acting like salt; light that is hidden is useless. Our Christian identity implies our responsibility to influence.

Salt and light always have a powerful influence on their environment. The salt has to be rubbed into the meat in order to stop it from rotting. The light has to shine in order to dispel the darkness.

But how? How can we be like salt and light?

Here are four ways in which we have the power, in Christ, to influence our world.

1. We have the power of prayer.

Now please don't roll your eyes when I say "prayer" and dismiss this as some pious platitude. It isn't! There is power in prayer. Some Christians are so busy with ministry or so socially active that they never stop to pray; that's a problem. Prayer is an indispensable part of the Christian's life. **The church's first duty toward society and its leaders is to pray for them.**

Paul wrote to his believers, *First of all ...*

I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, 1 Tim. 2:1-2

so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity 1 Tim. 2:1-2

If in our community there is more violence than peace, more indecency than modesty, more oppression than justice, more secularism than godliness, why is the church not praying for these things?

I think most of us, me included, tend to be more personal than global in our prayers. But are we not global Christians? Should we not share the global concerns of our global God? And these concerns should express themselves in our prayers. Let's exercise the power of prayer.

2. We have the power of truth

The Apostle Paul wrote, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes*" Rom. 1:16. The gospel message that Jesus as, "*truly the savior of the world*" still brings salvation and redemption to those who respond and believe in Jesus. John 4:42

But it isn't only the gospel that is powerful. All God's truth is powerful; much more powerful than the devil's lies. As the Apostle John wrote in the opening of his Gospel account, "*the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.*" Anywhere the truth of God shines, the darkness is dispelled.

3. We have the power of example

Truth is powerful when it's argued. It's more powerful when it's exhibited. People need not only to understand what we believe. They need to see the benefits of that belief with their own eyes.

In latter lands, the faithful and Spirit-empowered declaration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so transformed people that they in turn became His lights in the world. Prison reform, hospitals, trade unions, regulation of the liquor trade, abolition of slavery, abolition of child labor, establishment of orphanages, the civil rights movement—all these movements were spearheaded by followers of Jesus, in their drive for righteousness, and darkness was alleviated. This has always been the pattern when professing Christians have been less concerned with personal prestige and more concerned with demonstrating the kingdom.

John Marks, a producer for television's 60 Minutes, went on a two-year quest to investigate evangelicals, the group he had grown up among and later rejected. He wrote a book about his quest called **Reasons to Believe: One Man's Journey Among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind.**

The church's response to Hurricane Katrina turned the corner for him and became a key reason to believe. One Baptist church in Baton Rouge fed 16,000 people a day for weeks; another housed 700 homeless evacuees. Years after the hurricane and long after federal assistance had dried up, a network of churches in surrounding states was still sending regular teams to help rebuild houses. Most impressively to Marks, all these church efforts crossed racial lines and barriers in the Deep South. As one worker told him, "*We had whites, blacks, Hispanics, Vietnamese, good old Cajun ... We just tried to say, hey, let's help people. This is our state. We'll let everybody else sort out that other stuff. We've got to cook some rice.*"

Marks concludes: *I would argue that this was a watershed moment in the history of American Christianity ... nothing spoke more eloquently to believers, and to nonbelievers who were paying attention, than the success of a population of believing volunteers measured against the massive and near-total collapse of secular government efforts. The storm laid bare an unmistakable truth. **More and more Christians have decided that the only way to reconquer America is through service. The faith no longer travels by word. It moves by the deed.***

That's the power of example. One Christian nurse in a hospital, one Christian teacher in a school, one Christian in a shop, or in a factory or office. Christians are marked people. The world is watching. This is God's major way for changing the old culture, by implanting within it His new kingdom with its different values, different standards, different joys and different goals; so that, people see and are attracted.

As Jesus said,

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:16

4. We have the power of the group

The power of a committed minority. Sociologist Robert Bellah, at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, concluded, "*We should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a whole culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision.*"

That was the way of Jesus. He began with a small group of only 12 committed people. Within a few years, Roman officials complained they were turning the world upside down. There is a great need for dedicated Christian groups committed to one another, committed to the truth, committed to Christ, who will pray together, think together, formulate policies together, get to work together in the community.

In parts of American society (especially in higher education and Silicon Valley) it's not easy to be a traditional, orthodox Christian any longer. You may face threats to your career, your social standing, maybe even your employment. David French suggests we would do well to learn some valuable lessons from black Americans, especially the black church, a community that faced infinitely greater odds, confronted a far more hopeless future, and yet ultimately made extraordinary strides towards securing the blessings of American liberty.

Reverend Walter Fauntroy, an early member of the Congressional Black Caucus, was asked why the civil-rights movement, after so many years of subjugation and segregation, had made such rapid legal gains in the early 1960s. His response was immediate. "*Almighty God and the First Amendment.*" The First Amendment gave them a voice, and God softened Americans' hearts, enabling them to finally hear the message. How odd that, in the face of far lesser challenges to liberty and equality, there are Christians who despair of the future! They act as if God simply doesn't soften human hearts any longer.

If we have the opportunity to speak and possess the courage to tell the truth, we have a hope that can transform a nation. What was true for our black brothers and sisters in far more dire circumstances is still true for contemporary Christians in these less trying times.

So here is the take home from today's message:

As God's salt and light in this world, we have a part to play, and the power to play it.

Let me close with one final story: Dialing the wrong phone number can be awkward, embarrassing, and sometimes downright frustrating. When a young man forgot to notify his grandmother of a change in his cell phone number before Thanksgiving, however, the result was touching. Wanda Dench texted a number that had originally been her grandson's, inviting

him over for Thanksgiving dinner. Instead of her grandson, the text went to 17 year-old Jamal Hinton. The two figured out the mistake quickly, but Hinton asked if it was possible to "still get a plate." In grandmotherly fashion, Dench responded, "***Of course you can. That's what grandmas do.***" The story went viral online. When asked about the encounter after Thanksgiving, the young man said, "*I'm thankful for all the nice people in the world. I never met her ... and she welcomed me into her house, so that shows me how great of a person she is.*"

If the church would take its mission to love its neighbors seriously, a few words in this story could be easily replaced. "*Of course you can. That's what [Christians] do. ... I'm thankful for all the [Christians] in the world. who have welcomed me into their house, so that shows me [the love of God inside of them].*"

We have a part to play, and the power to play it. Bedford Presbyterian can have enormous influence for Christ right here in our own back yard if we live out what we have become in Christ: His salt and His light in the world.