

The Difference You Make

SERIES: *THE LIFE GOD BLESSES*

On March 31 of this year the SJ Mercury News ran an article in their religion section called, "The Patterns of Belief." It was a report on a new Harvard-designed survey of 40 communities around the nation with regard to religious affiliation. One of the communities was Silicon Valley; another was San Francisco. The survey revealed something that probably won't surprise most of you. It revealed that the people of both SF and the Silicon Valley are "far less likely to belong to a place of worship, to volunteer in a place of worship, to find a sense of community there, or even to trust the people they meet there. They attend religious services with less regularity than Americans pretty much anywhere else..." One university professor put it this way, "If some mad scientist were put in a laboratory and asked to create the quintessentially secular metropolitan area in the United States, they couldn't do better than the Silicon Valley." The study even showed that people who are religious when they moved here from other parts of the country become less religious when they are here. Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor who designed the study, summarized it this way, "Northern California is un-excelled in its lack of religious observance."

I wonder, as followers of Christ, how do you respond to that? How does that make you feel? One response I often hear is that of frustration and even anger. Sometimes I feel that. We see all the corruption and evil and we begin to feel defensive; we want to point the finger and cast blame. We start to dream about moving to some idyllic community where Christian values dominate the culture; where you can mention to your neighbor that you are going to church and not have him look at you like you are a member of the Aryan Nation. We're tired of being outnumbered. We're tired of being misunderstood. We're tired of raising our kids in a spiritual wasteland.

But what if I told you that the problem is not them, but us? What if I told you that the church of Jesus Christ is responsible for the corruption and decay and decline of morality on the SF Peninsula? What if I told you that if Jesus Christ were here today he would hold us accountable for those statistics; he would call us on the carpet.

In Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus looks at his disciples in the eye and says, "**YOU are the salt of the earth...YOU are the light of the world.**" It's not insignificant that this comes immediately after telling them they are blessed when they are persecuted. It's in the midst of opposition and unbelief that our light shines the brightest. Salt and light are the answer to the needs of a dark and decaying world.

What did Jesus mean by calling us salt and light? In what sense do these two word pictures make us the key to change in the midst of the most secular environment in the entire United States of America? These are the questions I want to answer. There are five important truths the metaphors of salt and light communicate.

1. First, followers of Jesus Christ are fundamentally different than everyone else.

The Greeks were wonderful communicators. When they wanted to emphasize a word, they would take it out of its normal word order and bring it right up to the front of the sentence. It's like they took a yellow highlighter and ran it right over that word. That's what they did here with the word "You." This ought to be translated, "YOU are the salt of the earth...YOU are the light of the world." Who is he talking about? He's talking about his disciples; not just yesterday's disciples, but today's disciples. He's saying, "With all your giftedness, with all your hangups, with your background and your job and your limitations, YOU are the salt of the earth; YOU are the light of the world." And by doing that he's setting you and me apart from the rest of the world. It's like Jesus is taking a black felt pen and running a dividing line right through humanity. There is the community of the redeemed and the community of the lost. They are as different as light from darkness and salt from decay.

John Stott tells the story of a little Hindu girl in India who had come into contact with some Christians. Nobody in her circle knew what a Christian was and so they asked her, "What

is a Christian?" She thought for a few moments and replied, "Well, as far as I can see, a Christian is somebody who is different from everybody else." Would that it were true!

In what way should we be different? What makes us different is the fact that we have surrendered our lives to Jesus. And part of surrendering our lives to Jesus is adopting his values. What are his values? Well, that's what we've been studying the last couple of months. His values are listed in the Beatitudes. We've seen how these eight Beatitudes of Jesus are upside down from the world's values. It's as we live these values that our fundamental distinctiveness will show up. Think of yourself as a poor beggar before God, grieve over what is wrong in you and in the world, operate with meekness, show mercy rather than vengeance, try to make peace with others, and you will stand out. When Jesus calls us salt and light, he's saying we are different.

2. Second, the world needs us, whether it knows it or not.

By using these two metaphors, Jesus was communicating something about the world around us. In Jesus' day, there was no refrigeration or rapid transportation. The bulk of the fish were harvested up in Galilee but the major market was way down in Jerusalem. That was a problem. How do you get the fish from the north in Galilee to the south in Jerusalem? The answer is you rub that fish down with salt. Salt prevents meat and fish from rotting and decaying. By using this metaphor of salt, Jesus was saying something about the world. He was saying that, left to itself, the world is rotting. Left to itself, the world is not getting any better; it's not evolving into some kind of utopian society; it's decaying. That's why the world needs us. Our job is to stop the rot. As salt we're to help prevent society from going down the tubes.

The metaphor of light communicates a similar truth. Light was an absolutely precious commodity in Jesus' day. There was no PG&E. Talk about an energy shortage! They didn't have any energy. Darkness to us was light to them. Have you ever been somewhere that's really dark? I mean, so dark you couldn't see your own hand two inches in front of your face? Imagine living without any light at all.

Jesus says the world is a dark place. Without you it has no light at all. What does light do? It's interesting - the function of salt is primarily negative in that its job was to

prevent something. But the function of light is primarily positive in that it illuminates the darkness. Not only are we to prevent decay but we are to spread light. Not only are we to stop the spread of corruption, we are to promote the spread of truth and goodness.

This week I met a man of retirement age who had been a very successful attorney. He brought me a bunch of bottles of vitamins to take over to Russia. He said he wanted me to deliver them to a woman named Tatiana. Tatiana lives in Moldova, which is the poorest nation in the former Soviet block. Somehow this man had met Tatiana several years ago and saw that she had a passion to reach street kids in her native Moldova. He and a bunch of businessmen got together and started to support her ministry. As a matter of fact, now 100% of her support comes from this small group of men. He was absolutely ecstatic to hear that Tatiana would be at the conference in Moscow and we would get to meet her. I couldn't get him out of my living room as he told me all about her ministry to street kids. That man and his friends are being salt and light in Moldova. They are preventing decay. They are spreading the light; helping people in darkness see the light of the Gospel. The world needs people like that.

3. Third, we must penetrate the world at every level.

Throughout history, an unfortunate thing has occurred among Christians. Knowing that they are to be different from the world, they have tried to retreat from the world. It started with the monastic movement; monks with good motives retreated from society to keep themselves from being stained by the evil in the world. But Jesus never taught that. He sent us out, as he put it, like sheep among wolves. A wolf pack is a very dangerous place for sheep. We are to be in the world but not of the world.

Salt doesn't do a lot of good by itself. It has to soak into the fish and the meat to preserve it. Sometimes the church becomes kind of a salt warehouse. It tries to store salt instead of spread salt. That's a tragedy! When you store salt, all it does is take up space. It does absolutely no good at all.

It's the same way with light. Light is designed to permeate the darkness. Jesus says you don't try to hide light. A city set on hill can't be hidden. In the Middle East, cities were built on hills because it is cooler there and they could be defended easier. At nighttime those cities are always in view. They glow in the distance. You can't pull a shade down on one of those cities. And you don't light a lamp and put it under a basket. I've never

been to a home where the carpeting had a big lump in the middle.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, that’s our new lamp.”

You don’t put a lamp under a rug. You put it on stand so someone sitting can read the newspaper. Jesus says, “That’s how you ought to be. Let your light shine before men so they see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” They can’t see them if you’re hiding in the church.

When I was a young believer I believed in the pyramid of Christian service. At the top was the cross cultural missionary. The most spiritual people were those who left home and went to live in the jungle to tell the natives about Jesus. At the second level just below the missionaries were those who stayed home to be a pastor. Pastors could make a difference, but not quite like the missionaries. Now below that it all got kind of fuzzy. Maybe doctors and teachers were next, but basically if you were not in full-time Christian service you were spiritually a little suspect. And if you were in politics or the media, you were on the brink of falling away from the faith.

It’s time we blow up that pyramid. I have come to see that those who are working in the darkest areas, such as politics or the media, have the greatest challenges. Those who are salt and light in their secular professions are the real spiritual heroes. They are called to do what they do just as I am called to do what I do.

Someone says to me, “Mark, I’m the only Christian in my company.” They want me to feel sorry for them, or tell them to get another job. I want to say, “Congratulations. God Almighty has entrusted the entire outfit to you!”

We need to penetrate the world at every level.

4. The fourth thing this metaphor teaches us is we must not lose our distinctiveness.

Salt has to retain its saltiness or it’s good for nothing. We know from chemistry that salt is sodium chloride and as sodium chloride can’t lose its saltiness. So what is Jesus talking about? In Palestine most of the salt was made from the

Dead Sea, which was filled with white minerals that looked like salt. Farmers piled the impure salt behind their houses and used it for fertilizing their fields. But when the rains came and pounded on that mound of salt, the sodium chloride would be washed away and a useless, white sandy substance would be left. Farmers would just throw it out on the hard path in front of the house to be trampled on.

Salt that loses its distinctiveness is worthless. That’s true of believers. Not only must we penetrate society, but we must retain our unique character as believers. Otherwise, we lose our impact. Being in the world, we have to beware of being watered down by the world’s values. We have to accept the fact that we are called to a very different kind of lifestyle. Once again, it’s outlined in the Beatitudes and all the rest of the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus talks about people seeing your good works in v. 16, he’s not talking about “random acts of kindness.” He’s talking about just living by the values of his kingdom. Being meek and merciful. Valuing righteousness and justice. Making peace.

It’s interesting to me that Jesus didn’t say, “You are the sugar of the earth.” It’s not sweetness that makes a difference; it’s salt. Salt has a bite to it, doesn’t it? Sometimes salt can irritate and sting, but if we don’t retain our distinctiveness, our impact is lost and the world decays.

So when we look at the Bay Area and see massive secularization, whose fault is it? Let me put it this way: If the meat goes bad, do you blame the meat? No! You say, “What happened to the salt?” If the house is dark, do you get angry with the house? No! You say, “What happened to the light?” If society goes bad, do you blame society? No! You say, “What happened to the believers? It’s our fault. We are to blame. We’ve lost our distinctiveness.” It’s time for God’s people to stop complaining and start being salt and light. And when we do that, there’s is nothing that can stop us.

5. This is the fifth thing: As salt and light, we’re the most powerful influence on earth.

There is no reason for us to be pessimistic. Jesus clearly tells us here that we can change the world. Here he looks at a small band of Jewish peasants. They weren’t the rich and the powerful and the influential of their day. They were just ordinary people. But he called them world-changers: “You are the salt of the

earth...You are the light of the world." These Jews were going beyond Palestine; beyond the barriers of Judaism and into the whole world!

The French culture of the early 1700s was in the process of decay. The King had a motto: "After me the deluge." He was absolutely right: that was a prophetic voice. The deluge came and France was ripped apart by the French Revolution.

Just twenty miles across the channel, the English culture had the same rot. Historians have described at length the moral corruption of English culture. And yet England did not go through a revolution. What spared it? Its mighty navy? Its suave diplomats? Its politicians? Its police force? No. The country was spared, as historian and president Woodrow Wilson insisted, because in 1703 a man called John Wesley was born in England.

In Wesley's early years his heart was "strangely warmed," and he became a citizen of the kingdom of God. He reached out and won others to Christ, and the historians believe that it was in large part the righteous Methodist movement, spread like salt throughout the land, that delivered England from a revolution.

The safety of a nation does not reside in its military genius, its armies, or even its atomic weapons; it comes from the character of its people. Throughout history, civilizations have fallen like decaying trees. The outward push may come from an enemy, but the country falls because of inward rot. As salt and light, we are the ones to stop the decay. We are the ones to spread the light.

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