

As you know, we inaugurated a new President this week. Scripture tells us that *“petitions, prayers, intercession, thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness”* (1 Timothy 2:1-2). With that in mind, I want us to pray for our new President:

Lord God, you've appointed governments and leaders according to your sovereignty and goodwill. You uphold societies through the leaders of nations, and you work through them. We pray for President Biden as he begins his time in office. We ask that you give him wisdom and strength to govern justly and in a Godly manner. We ask that you surround him with men and women of integrity who will counsel him in ways that are pleasing to you. We ask that throughout his Presidency, he'd turn to you, depend on you and that you'd guide him. We ask that he'd lead in a way that allows us as your followers to live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. Lord, we put our trust in you, and as Jesus taught us, we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” In Jesus' name and for his sake, amen.

Well, we're continuing in our series on cultural engagement called, So I send you. Cultural engagement is part of our vision to be transformed people, transforming the Peninsula. But I think it's worth asking whether or not we really believe that's possible. Do we believe we can actually make a dent in an area where the vast majority of people are far from God?

A few years ago, the San Jose Mercury News ran an article called “The Patterns of Belief.” It was a report on a Harvard 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 said the people of both San Francisco and 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 stated,

**If mad scientists 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.” Robert Putnam, a Harvard professor who designed the study, summarized it this way, Northern California is un-excelled in its lack of religious observance.**

As followers of Jesus, all of this can lead to a tremendous sense of pessimism. Maybe we feel discouraged, even helpless. How can we possibly

make a dent in this tidal wave of unbelief? Maybe we even dream about moving to some idyllic community where Christian values are more acceptable. But what if I told you that there's no place better for a follower of Jesus to be than here? What if I told you, the church of Jesus Christ has the high calling of stopping the decline of faith and righteousness on the San Francisco Peninsula? What if I even told you the Lord Jesus holds us accountable for that?

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus looks at his disciples in the eyes and says,

**You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**

What did Jesus mean by calling us salt and light? These two word pictures make us the key to bringing transformation to our community. There are several important truths communicated through the metaphors of salt and light.

### **Followers of Jesus are different from everyone else**

First, followers of Jesus are fundamentally different from everyone else. The Greeks were wonderful communicators. When they wanted to emphasize a word, they'd take it out of its normal word order and bring it right up to the front of the sentence. That's like taking a yellow highlighter and running it right over that word. That's what they did here with the word “you.” Note the emphasis. *“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”* And he uses the plural, so he's speaking collectively to his followers. He's speaking to us as a church community. He's saying, “You, with all you bring to the table, both good and bad, both strengths and weaknesses, both joys and sorrows, you together are the salt of the earth; you together are the light of the world.” And by doing that, he's setting us apart from the rest of the world. He's drawing a dividing line right through humanity. There's the community of the redeemed and the community of the lost. They're as different as light from darkness and salt from decay.

There's a story of a young Hindu girl in India who'd come in contact with some Christians. Nobody in her circle knew what a Christian was, 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 different from everybody else.” Would that it was true!

In what way should we be different? What makes us different is we've surrendered our lives to Jesus. And part of surrendering our lives to Jesus is adopting his values. What are his values? Well, look at what comes immediately before this call to be salt and light. This is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus started with what we call the Beatitudes.

He started and said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit...*" In other words, blessed are those who recognize their own spiritual poverty; their own bankruptcy before God; those who know they have nothing to offer God.

Then he says, "*Blessed are those who mourn...*" He's not talking about mourning the loss of a loved one but mourning over our own sin, brokenness, and lack of innocence; not only that but mourning over a world filled with evil and injustice.

Then "*Blessed are the meek...*" That word means to be humble, gentle, considerate of others. Meekness is not weakness; it's strength under control. John Calvin said the meek are

**persons of mild and gentle dispositions, who are not easily provoked by injuries, which are not ready to take offense but are prepared to endure anything rather than do the like actions to wicked men.**

Next, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...*" We tend to think of this as hungering for individual righteousness. That's part of it. This can also point to hungering for righteousness and justice in our world. We long to be righteous and just people, and we long for that in our world as well.

Then he says, "*Blessed are the merciful...*" Sometimes people who care deeply for righteousness are also harsh, but not here. They're merciful because they've received mercy. They have compassion for both the oppressed and the oppressor. They look beyond vengeance and are willing to forgive and to offer people a new beginning.

Next, he says, "*Blessed are the pure in heart...*" This means a heart without divided loyalties. Everything we do from Monday to Sunday has a Godward focus. No split loyalties, no compartmentalization of faith and work. Disciples are pure in heart.

Then, "*Blessed are peacemakers...*" We bring peace into situations of conflict, even violence, whether in families, neighborhoods, or nations. We build bridges between people, enabling people to drop their angry words and weapons and listen to each other.

Finally, "*Blessed are those persecuted because of righteousness...*" If you live by this value system of Jesus, you'll be at odds with the world's values, and you'll likely pay a price for that.

You see, these Beatitudes are upside down from the world's values. This is what it means to be salt and light. It means we're different. Lesslie Newbigin said, "Live in the kingdom of God in such a way that it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer." It's as we live this way that our fundamental distinctiveness will show up.

## **The world needs us, whether it knows it or not**

Second, the world needs us, whether it knows it or not. By calling us salt and light, Jesus is saying something about the world around us. Think about how salt was used in Jesus' day. Salt was a preservative for meat and fish. Most of the fish was harvested up in Galilee, but much of it had to be shipped down to Jerusalem. That was a problem. There was no refrigeration or rapid transportation. How do you get the fish from the North in Galilee to the South in Jerusalem without it rotting? The answer is you rub it down with salt. Salt prevents meat and fish from decay.

Make no mistake, Jesus is saying something about the world. He's saying, left to itself, it's rotting. Left to itself, the world isn't 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. That's not always fun or easy. Sometimes it means getting involved in situations that are messy and even disgusting. But that's what Jesus did. He touched lepers. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes.

The metaphor of light communicates a similar truth. Light was a precious commodity in Jesus' day. There was no PG&E. Have you ever been somewhere really dark? I mean, so dark you can't see your hand two inches in front of your face? Imagine living without any light at all.

Jesus knows the world is a dark place. Without you, it has no light at all. What does light do? Interestingly, the function of salt is primarily negative in that its job is to prevent something. But the function of light is primarily positive in that it illuminates the darkness. Not only do we prevent decay, but we spread light. Not only can we stop the spread of corruption, but we can also promote the spread of truth and goodness. The world needs us, whether it knows it or not

## **We must penetrate the world at every level**

This leads to the third thing: we must penetrate the world at every level. Throughout history, an unfortunate thing has occurred among Christians. Knowing we are to be different from the world, we've 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 amongst wolves.

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 like 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's 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 a hill can't be hidden. In the Middle East, cities were built on hills because it's cooler there, and they could be defended easier. At nighttime, those cities were always in view, glowing in the distance. You can't pull a shade over one of those cities. And you don't light a lamp and put it under a bowl. 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 a stand to light up a dark place. 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 your good works if you're hiding in the church. You have to be in the world; you have to invade the darkness.

When I was a young believer, I believed in the pyramid of Christian service. At the top were missionaries. The most spiritual people were those who left home and went to live in the jungle to tell the natives about Jesus. Just below the missionaries were pastors. Pastors weren't quite as spiritual as the missionaries, but they could make a difference. Now below that, it got kind of fuzzy. Maybe doctors and teachers were next, but basically, if you weren't in full-time Christian service, you were a notch below. And if you were in politics or the media, you were on the brink of falling away from the faith. Here's the deal, we need to blow up that pyramid. I've come to see those working in the darkest arenas have the greatest ministry; they're the real spiritual heroes.

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. But I want to say, "Congratulations. God Almighty has entrusted the entire outfit to you!" We need to penetrate the world at every level.

### **We must not lose our distinctiveness**

But this leads to the fourth thing: we must not lose our distinctiveness. Now Jesus tells us, *"You are the salt of the earth."* This isn't a command but a statement of fact. He also warns us not to lose our saltiness. He says, *"But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot."* Salt has to stay salty, or it's good for nothing. Now we know from chemistry that salt is sodium chloride, and as such, it can't lose its saltiness. So what's Jesus talking about?

Well, Jesus knew in Palestine, most of the salt came from the Dead Sea, but it was mixed with other minerals that looked like salt. Farmers piled up that mixture of salt and minerals and used it to fertilize their fields. But when the rains came and pounded on that mixed mound, the salt would be washed away, and a white sandy substance was left. It looked like salt, but it was useless. Farmers would just throw it out on the hard path to be trampled on.

Salt that loses its distinctiveness is worthless. Light that's put under a bowl is worthless too. This is 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 we're called to a different kind of lifestyle. Jesus talks about people seeing our "good deeds." What does he mean by that? He's talking about the things he goes on and teaches right here in the Sermon on the Mount. He talks about going beyond external obedience to the law and looking into our own hearts. What we think is righteous anger is tantamount to murder. What we think are harmless fantasies he calls adultery.

He talks about loving our enemies; loving people who don't think as we do; loving people who don't like us and mistreats us. He says that if you only do good things for your friends, you're no different from unbelievers? He talks about sharing our possessions with the poor and needy. Seeking for others what we seek for ourselves. He says to be generous and not to worry about what we'll eat and drink and wear because our Heavenly Father knows what we need, and he'll provide.

I could go on and on. These are the "good deeds" he's talking about. I like what Tim Keller wrote about the early church.

**The early church was strikingly different from the culture around it in this way—the pagan society was stingy with its money and promiscuous with its body. A pagan gave nobody their money and practically gave everybody their body. And the Christian came along and gave practically nobody their body and practically everybody their money.**

So when we look at the Bay Area and see pervasive secularization, whose responsible for that? 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, "Who turned the lights out? If society goes bad, do you blame society? No! You say, "What happened to the church?" Have we lost our distinctiveness? Have we put our light under a bowl? It's time for God's people to stop pointing fingers and start being salt and light.

### **As salt and light, we're the most powerful influence on earth**

When we do that, nothing can stop us. You see, as salt and light, we're the most powerful influence on earth. There's no reason for us to be pessimistic. Ray Stedman used to say believers should be characterized by "unquenchable optimism." Jesus is telling us we can change the world! Here he looks at a small band of Jewish peasants. They weren't the rich and the powerful of their day; just ordinary people. But he calls them world-changers: *"You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world."* These men and women would go beyond Palestine, beyond the barriers of Judaism, and into the whole world! In AD 40, there were about 5,000 Christians in the Roman empire, but by AD 300, there were five million. They didn't have church buildings. They weren't allowed to have them. They worshiped in house churches. They didn't have laws protecting their freedom to worship. How did they make a difference in that kind of environment? It happened because a few Christ-Followers took seriously their call to be salt and light.

Ernest Gordon was a WWII British Army officer captured at sea by the Japanese at age 24. He was sent to work on a railway line the Japanese were constructing through the dense Thai jungle. For labor, they conscripted prisoners of war captured from the British Army. Each day Gordon would join a work detail of thousands of prisoners who hacked their way through the jungle to build a track.

The conditions were horrifying. The men worked practically naked under a broiling sun in 120-degree heat, their bodies stung by insects, their bare feet cut and bruised by sharp stones. If a prisoner appeared to

be lagging, he was beaten. Many dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. Eighty thousand men died building the railway.

Ernest Gordon was gradually wasting away. Paralyzed and unable to eat, he was laid in the Death House where dying prisoners were put until they stopped breathing. The stench was unbearable. He had no energy to fight off the bedbugs, lice, and swarming flies. He propped himself up long enough to write a final letter to his parents and then lay back to await the inevitable.

For most of the war, the prison camp had been survival of the fittest, every man for himself. In the food line, prisoners fought over food. Officers refused to share any of their special rations. Theft was common in the barracks. Men lived like animals. The conditions brought out the worst in them. But then something happened. One particular event changed everything in that prison camp.

Guards carefully counted tools at the end of a day's work, and one day a guard shouted that a shovel was missing. He walked up and down the ranks demanding to know who'd stolen it. When no one confessed, he screamed, "All die! All die!" and raised his rifle to fire at the first man in line. At that instant, an enlisted man stepped forward, stood at attention, and said, "I did it." The guard began beating the prisoner, who, despite the blows, still managed to stand at attention. Enraged, the guard lifted his weapon high in the air and brought the rifle butt down on the soldier's skull. The man sank in a heap to the ground. When the assault finally stopped, the other prisoners picked up his corpse and marched back to the camp. That evening, when tools were inventoried again, the work crew discovered a mistake had been made: no shovel was missing.

After that one act of generosity and sacrifice, one of the prisoners remembered the verse, "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13 KJV). Attitudes in the camp began to shift. Prisoners started treating the dying with respect, organizing proper funerals, marking each man's grave with a cross. Prisoners began looking out for each other rather than themselves. Thefts grew increasingly rare. Men began selling their watches to the guards to buy medicines for the sick. The prisoners even built a tiny church, and each evening they gathered to worship and pray for one another. Gordon himself received extensive care from the other prisoners and was nursed back to health. The unity inspired by sacrifice impacted him more than just physically. It had a profound impact on his spiritual life. Gordon went home, completed seminary, and later became the dean of the chapel at Princeton University.

Philip Yancey tells this story in his book, *Rumors of Another World*. He writes,

**Perhaps something similar to this was what Jesus had in mind as he turned again and again to his favorite topic: the kingdom of God. In the soil of**

**this violent, disordered world, an alternative community may take root. It lives in the hope of a day of liberation. In the meantime, it aligns itself with another world, not just spreading rumors, but planting settlements in advance of that coming reign.**

Can that kind of transformation happen right here on the San Francisco Peninsula? Might we do more than spread rumors of another world? Might we plant a settlement of his coming reign? I believe we can. But we must first repent of pessimism that lacks faith in the power of the gospel. And we must offer ourselves to him, finding creative ways to be salt and light in our community. We must do that as a church and also as individuals.

Let me encourage you to start where you live and where you work. Ask yourself, "Where has God placed me? Who has he placed near me?" Stop seeing them as just a part of the landscape, but as real people God created and loves. Thoughtfully and graciously move into their lives and be who you are: the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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