

**“Salt and Light”**  
**The Way of Jesus**  
**Downtown & Lexington**  
**August 30, 2020**

Think back on the last time you saw a Christian or church in the news... was it for a good thing or a bad thing?... If I had to bet, I'd bet not so good. Whether it's churches ignoring health warnings and putting communities at risk. Churches making power grabs by getting in bed with politicians. This week it was another prominent "Christian" leader caught in a sex scandal. It's a mess. And it's a shame. Mostly, because of the contrast with how Jesus described what the church should be. And also because if you don't know any real Christians and you think the guy in the news is representative of all Christians, then you likely end up thinking Christianity is a joke.

Jesus touches on all these ideas in our passage today in **Matthew 5**. We're in week 3 of a series called **The Way of Jesus** - looking at the sermon on the mount where Jesus teaches His followers about life in His kingdom. Teaching them to live like Him and value what He values.

If you're new to our church or not a Christian... just checking things out, this is a great week. We'll unpack a lot of who Jesus intends for us to be as a church and how we go about that.

If you've been around for a minute, some of this will be familiar. A few times you'll be able to predict what I'm about to say. But that's good. It means I'm doing my job.

**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 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.

Jesus tells His followers they are salt and light. And the first thing to point out here is the first word. Look back at verse 13. What's the first word? "You."

This is a weakness of the English language. "You" is both the singular and plural second-person pronoun. Addressing a crowd or one single person, the proper English word is "you."

So we could make the mistake of thinking Jesus is addressing us as individuals here:

- You, individual Christian, are the salt of the world.
- You, individual follower of Jesus, are the light of the world.

But this is wrong. You, individual Christian, are not the salt nor the light of the world.

This Little Light of Mine, while a cute song, is a lie.

Now while the English language suffers from this grammatical weakness, this is not a weakness of the southern dialect. In our intellectual superiority, we have a way to make our second-person pronouns unambiguously plural, to the glory of God. When addressing an individual we say "you", and when addressing a group we say "ya'll." Praise God.

Someone needs to crowdfund a Southern translation of the Bible to clear up this confusion. The Ya'll Translation. This is what Jesus is saying:

Y'all are the salt of the earth. Y'all are the light of the world. We know for at least 3 reasons:

- 1.) First verses in Mt. 5 say Jesus is teaching His disciples and a larger crowd. He's addressing a big ol' ya'll. But maybe He's teaching them as individuals in the larger group, right?
- 2.) No. Reason #2. Right after salt and light, the next thing Jesus says is, "*A city on a hill cannot be hidden.*" Picture, if you will, an empty city with a lone man in the streets screaming "I am the city of salt and light!"... No. No sir, you are not. You are in need of a psychiatrist. There's no such thing as a one-man city. The beauty of a city is many working together.
- 3.) In case you're still not convinced, the Greek here is all plural. Plural nouns and verbs. Ya'll. Not you. "Couldn't you have started with that one?" Sure. But it wouldn't have been as fun.

Whatever Jesus is saying here about salt and light... His instructions are for a ya'll, not a you. Ok, so what is he saying? Let's go back to verse 13 with the Southern dialect added for clarity:

#### **Matthew 5:13**

[Ya'll] 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.

Today, we predominantly use salt for flavor. But in the first-century world, salt was also used as a preservative. There was no refrigeration, so if you wanted your meat to last, you had to salt it. This is still a viable option. If you need a hobby, perhaps consider artisanal handcrafting meats and sausages. I'll happily be your taste-tester. And salt will be your main ingredient. Because salt preserves the meat as it flavors the meat. It prevents rot and decay. Let's keep going in verse 14:

#### **Matthew 5:14-15**

[Ya'll] 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.

Here's the picture Jesus is painting: **Salt** is about inner composition. Salt preserves the meat's internal integrity. **Light** is about outward display. Light shines, pushing darkness back and helping everyone in the house to see. Together, **salt and light prevent decay and darkness.**

This is what Jesus calls His people to be - inwardly transformed by His love and as a result, a city of light on display. He makes this even more clear in verse 16:

#### **Matthew 5:16**

In the same way, let [ya'll's] light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to [ya'll's] Father who is in heaven.

Let's unpack what the phrase "good works" means in this verse: there are two Greek words that can be used for good, "*agathos*" and "*kalos*." "*Agathos*" means "of good or high quality" and "*kalos*" means "beautiful." In this passage, the word "*kalos*" is used. He intends for His followers' communal life to be beautiful. Full of beautiful shiny deeds that reflect His love.

In this regard, a negative situation... say hypothetically, a pandemic... can be an opportunity for the church to shine bright. Right now, people are struggling. Mental health is struggling. I saw a horrifying study on what percentage of people in certain age groups considered suicide in the last thirty days. The numbers are crazy high. Anxiety and depression are way up. Alcohol use is also way up.

People are grasping at ways to cope... And we are too! But we have the resources to draw near to God and be filled with His joy in the midst of the negative circumstance. And then go out into our neighborhoods and jobs and schools asking "How can I be a blessing here? How can I lift others up? Who can I encourage? How can I bring Jesus' beautiful kingdom here?"

So this Sunday night at the prayer and worship night we're worshipping God and praying together for our own good... But we're also doing a school supply drive for Ezekiel Ministry... because even in the midst of our unknowns, we DO know that Jesus is constant... So we're freed up to think about someone else in more need and love and serve them. That's beautiful!

But did you catch back in v. 13, Jesus mentioned a potential problem for this beauty? →

### **Matthew 5:13**

[Ya'll] 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.

Over time, and through use, salt can become unsalty. And unsalty salt is useless. Lost its flavor and ability to preserve. They would throw it out in the street to get trampled on with the mud and trash and animal excrement.

And if I'm being honest, I'd say Jesus' picture of unsalty salt here describes way too much of American Christianity. And not just the scandals in the headlines, although those are pictures of unsalty Christians getting discredited and trampled on like Jesus says they would.

But even more so, the average person in America who says they're following Jesus but nothing in their life looks like Him. No internal life change and no external display of His glorious beauty. One researcher described this un-saltiness in this way:

### **Michael Horton**

Evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general.

This is a massive issue if Jesus says we're supposed to be salt and light in the world. Can I just talk to you for a minute and tell you some of what I think has happened?

At some point, **the American church became fascinated with growth.** A wave of somewhat well-intentioned churches wanted to import business and marketing ideals in order to reach people far from Jesus. In and of themselves, not a terrible idea. But church growth became a monster. Became its own genre of books, leadership conferences where the only people on stage had grown something huge. Everyone began to measure their church's value based on its size. But that idea, that the bigger something is, the more valuable it is... that's an American capitalist idea, not a Jesus idea. I'll give you an analogy:

Have you heard of a burger chain called McDonald's? It's very big. They used to promote themselves by declaring on their signs how many burgers they'd sold. Why? Because in capitalism, bigger sales = bigger value. When the truth is, their food is trash. There are entire documentaries about this fact.

Let's contract McDonald's with a Columbia establishment called the Kingsman. They actually rent space from our Lexington church in their new building, but it's called the Griffin Chophouse in that location. Here's what the Kingsman does: They take their leftover ribeyes - the most flavorful cut of steak... grind it up into burgers. They cook those ribeye burgers on a flat top that's been seasoned over 40-50 years. They add homemade pimento cheese. They add bacon. They add fresh fried jalapeños. It's one of the highest quality, most luscious burger experiences you'll ever have.

Now in terms of size, they aren't huge. No rapid franchising or expansion. But there isn't a rational human on the planet who'd rather have McDonald's. The Kingsman has a quality and richness to what they do. They make Columbia Better. McDonald's is just here. Being big.

And the problem downstream is if we only care about having a big church then we start cutting corners on fighting to see people's lives actually be changed. And for individuals, it's too easy to hide in a crowd, appear godly, nod along to the teaching, sing some songs, without ever letting anyone know you enough to help you grow. This is why we push so hard for LifeGroups. We have to get into small intentional places to become the salt and light community Jesus is talking about.

Now **there are other churches that don't focus on being big. Instead, they focus almost entirely on knowledge.** Spiritual maturity gets defined by the amount of facts you know.

It can be tough to diagnose because knowledge in and of itself isn't bad... but if it doesn't lead to life change then we aren't becoming what Jesus said we are to be: Salt and Light.

To confirm this, breeze through the gospels and look at how Jesus interacts with the Pharisees - the most knowledgeable Bible scholars in the world at that time... Jesus is savage in attacking and exposing their hollow way of religious life.

Because Jesus defines maturity... not by how much you know, but by how much you grow. ...

Jesus defines maturity not by the answers you can give, but by how you live.

Guys... the things I'm saying RHYME! ... And they are also accurate.

Another researcher summed up American Christianity over the last 70 years in this way:

**George Barna**

American Christianity has largely failed since the middle of the 20th century because Jesus' modern-day disciples do not act like Jesus.

That's the problem. The problem isn't knowing things. Having your mind filled with God's Word is actually a prerequisite for a changed life. We all need to read and learn a lot more because to renew our minds and think more like Christians than Americans...but the point remains... If what we're learning doesn't lead us to life and change, then we're missing it.

Ok, so those have more to do with how churches can end up making unsalty salt. I'll give you one even more so for you and I. A constant temptation we face is to approach Christianity like a consumer. Show up with our hands out, "Ok thank you. Put the spiritual goods and services right there." We can do it with teaching. "Ooooh I liked that sermon. It was funny."

We can do it with music. "Ughh, I just love her voice. Every time she sings, I get goosebumps.

We can do it with programs. What needs does this meet for my family? How does this gathering make me feel? We can even do it with community. We can treat our LifeGroups like they exist to meet my wants and preferences instead of realizing it exists to shape me into salt and light.

But Jesus is calling us in the exact opposite direction of consumerism. He's calling us to lay down our selfishness and be transformed by His self-sacrifice. To operate with a whole different set of priorities. To be a people who don't get caught up in the panic and anxiety of the kingdoms of this world. A people who make peace. A people who embody deep contentment in God and don't look to a bank account or a romance or politics for our hope. A people who embody a completely different way of life. And He intends for our saltiness to literally change the world!

Now if you're skeptical here... like really? Jesus expects *me* to go change the world??? Remember who He was talking to. These weren't the rich, the powerful, the elite. He was talking to average folk around the Sea of Galilee. Listen to how pastor and author Skye Jethani explains it:

### **Skye Jethani**

It isn't that He expected each person to change the world through remarkable accomplishments. Rather, Jesus expected His undistinguished followers to be the source of the world's most essential ingredients. Pliny, who lived in the first century, commented that there is nothing more useful in the world than 'salt and sunshine.' Likewise, in a dark deteriorating world, there is nothing more wonderful than simple people living as Jesus taught. The world does not need more ambitious Christians. Our world desperately needs more ordinary lives lived in rich communion with God.

Everything we do as a church is designed to help us become this kind of salt and light community. Ordinary lives lived in rich communion with God.

In our teaching, which includes every sermon, every class we teach, every article, our goal is to take the truth of God's Word and apply it to life. Our aim isn't being flashy nor being the most technical bible study you've ever been to. Our aim is life change.

In our LifeGroups, the goal is to put us all in environments where the things we learn on Sundays get pressed out and applied into normal life on Monday, and Tuesday, and Wednesday, etc..

Also, with my whole department, which includes Kidtown, Student Groups, and Milestones, our primary focus is equipping parents to be salt and light to their kids. We want our kid programming to be good enough. But what we pray for and want most is that your kids grow up seeing you loving Jesus and living as part of His salt and light community every day in your home.

With our Serve the City partnerships, we are trying to make sure our eyes stay open to real needs in our city and keep ourselves exposed to vulnerable people groups that Jesus has a huge heart for.

I can't think of anything we do as a church where this isn't the goal. And this is why, more than growth, more than knowledge... the stuff we celebrate is regular everyday salt and light stuff:

- Some of ya'll are wonderful neighbors. You bring people together. You check in on people. Your neighborhood would miss you if you were gone because **you are salt and light**.
- Some of you hold positions of leadership and authority in your job and the community. And you use your power to serve. You do what's best for the most people. You accomplish goals without using people. **You're being salt and light** and God is glorified.
- Some of you are incredibly generous with your resources. Your home is open. Your money and things are shared. You resist the temptation to close your hands by the power of God's Spirit. **You're being salt and light**. You got a salty wallet.

- Some of you parent with both emotional support and authority. You build up and you discipline. In a way that is foreign to most of the parents in your neighborhood and your child's school.

... Some of you have stepped into adoption and foster care situations. Some of you have helped parents in hard situations... Some of you have volunteered hundreds of hours in Kidtown and Student Groups\ In all of it **ya'll are being salt and light.** And God is glorified.

- Some of you who are unmarried handle your dating life in a beautiful, godly way. Your dating looks completely different from the dating scene around you. You reject the idea of using and taking from those you date in the name of Jesus. **You're being salt and light.**

... Some of you are married and you love and serve your spouse so selflessly and beautifully.

... Some of you are in really hard marriage situations but you've hung in there. **You're being salt and light.** Some of you have stepped in to support those in really hard marriage situations even when you don't know what to do or say. And **you're being salt and light too.**

- Some of you are slowly but surely overcoming anger problems and drinking problems and hopelessness and anxiety and depression and selfishness... **Salt and light.** And others of ya'll have come around the depressed, the suicidal, the anxious, the angry, the drunk, and you've said we will see you through this. **You're being salt and light.**

- Some of you when you came around our church you didn't even like people. And now you're a LifeGroup leader. Still not sure if you like people, but you love the people in your group. **Salt and light.** In all of these things, you are exposing the world to the Kingdom of Jesus, helping those around you see who Jesus is and what His love is all about... you are preserving and flavoring His world with His goodness and grace. There's a cumulative effect where people look and begin to realize that God is really at work in our midst. He really is shaping us and changing us.

Our goal is for all of us to grow in such a way that after a while our neighbors notice and cannot explain it away. Now, that's the long game. That's not flashy. That's a slow play that takes work and time. But a timely benefit of this plan is that it is disease proof. In fact, many plagues have come and gone and Jesus' salt and light community remain. Whether we're meeting in a big building or meeting in homes. Salt and light either way.