

## ***“Tasteless Salt and Invisible Light? (Part Two)” – Matthew 5:13-16***

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take your Bible, or the Bible in the pew in front of you, and turn with me to the book of Matthew. We paused last week to examine how the church in Antioch was a sending church. Today we will be back in our current series through the Sermon on the Mount and you'll find our passage in chapter 5 of Matthew.

We have looked at the verses before, a couple of weeks ago. This strikes me as a very important passage for churches in our setting. However, I'm not so sure the message that this passage communicates is one that is easy for us to hear. For this reason, the message has been neglected or ignored. The end result is the predicament we find ourselves in. We live in a society that is increasingly put off by the teachings of Jesus, the church's influence is clearly diminishing in the Western world, and all the signs would indicate that the culture is trending in the wrong direction with no U-turn in sight. What will that mean for us? What does that mean for the new generations that will make up the church? These are some of the questions we will explore today.

Before we get into all that, let's listen to God's Word. God gathered us today to hear and heed His Word, so listen now to what He has to say. Matthew 5, starting in verse 13...

*“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 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. 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.” (Matthew 5:13-16)*

This is God's Word...

Pray with me...

Father, have mercy on me a sinner. As I have read and thought on this passage, I fear that we, as individual people, and we, as the church in America, find ourselves on the wrong side of this warning. We hear the warning in Jesus' words. It is a terrifying warning. But perhaps we have been too quick to dismiss it as though it were meant for someone else. Help us to see clearly this morning. Help us to see your worth. Help us to see the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that we will not in fear or pride hide the light that He has given to us. We ask that you would do this work in our lives so that others, in the end, might glorify you, our Father in heaven. Amen.

I know it has been a couple of weeks, so let's review a bit. When we studied this passage before, we asked what Jesus was getting at when He likened His followers to salt and light? What characteristics did He have in mind?

This is a question that has been answered in a variety of ways because, particularly with salt, there are several first-century uses and characteristics that Jesus may have in mind. We itemized several of those in past weeks. Salt adds flavor. Salt is used as a preservative. Salt purifies. Salt was valuable back then. Salt

makes you thirsty. And so on... Jesus could have been alluding to any one of those things. Since we cannot say for certain which one or which combination Jesus had in mind, we considered if there was something that these characteristics have in common and something that both salt and light have in common. In fact, there are at least two things—*distinctiveness* and *influence*. Jesus is saying that He intends for His followers to possess a certain distinctiveness from the world around them and have a certain influence in the world.

We covered Christian *distinctiveness* last time we were in this text. We found that the kind of distinctiveness in view here is not what a lot of Christians imagine when they consider how they are to be different from the world. If we were write out a list describing Christian distinctiveness, there would probably be a lot of things on your list that have more to do with your culture, preferences, and background than they do with the teachings of Jesus. And the problem comes when we elevate those things, which I called “non-core” things because they are not biblically prescribed or mandated, to “core” status, something that is non-negotiable, something we are not willing to change for any reason, as though the Bible requires it.

There are at least two problems with that. The first problem is that this is the nature of legalism. This is exactly what the Pharisees did. They added rules to God’s rules and gave their rules the same level of authority. They then used their self-righteous standards to beat down those around them with criticism and judgment, including Jesus! This is the reason Jesus was criticized again and again by the most religious leaders, the churchiest folk of His day. He was not considered a good example by them.

The other danger of elevating non-core things to core status is that we inadvertently become the shepherds or defenders of “sacred cows.” What’s a “sacred cow”? It’s one of those “churchy” expressions that’s usually used derogatively of something that has been accepted or practiced for a long time, some tradition, that we have mistaken as something sacred, something we can’t think critically about or question or consider changing. But you know what else is a sacred cow? It is by definition an idol. I don’t want to die defending an idol, especially not in a church. But that happens all the time because we confuse what is core and what is not-core.

As we saw, the core matters are those that the Bible teaches, the non-core stuff is the stuff that the Bible allows a degree of freedom on. If it’s core, as defined by Scripture, then we should not seek to change it and we should allow our lives to be shaped and driven by it. If it’s non-core, and we have freedom in the matter, then we should ask what Paul asked the Corinthians—is it beneficial? And, particularly, is it beneficial for missions? Does it help us become all things to all people so that as many as possible will be saved through the Gospel?

But the main idea we covered was that the distinctiveness that Jesus has in view in this salt and light passage is not a legalistic and manmade list, it’s a distinctiveness that He is defining for us in His teachings. In this context, it’s defined by the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. We are to be a distinct people by being a people that lives out the virtues of the Beatitudes (which precede our text) and the ethics found in the rest of Jesus’ sermon (which we will be unpacking in the weeks ahead). *That* is the distinctiveness Jesus had in mind. And, ironically, that’s the distinctiveness that most Christians are tempted to neglect because it’s a lot easier for us to focus on a list we create.

Now, having said all that, let me say this. Jesus does not seem to have in mind here distinctiveness for the sake of itself. It’s *distinctiveness for the sake of influence*. Salt and light both have an effect on what they come into contact with. Salt effects meat by preserving it, or flavoring, or counteracting the decay, or whatever. Light effects darkness. Darkness grows in the absence of light. But here is what you have to see: it’s the distinctiveness of salt and light that produce its influence. If that distinctiveness is somehow lost,

like a salt losing its saltiness, then so goes the intended influence. If the light is hidden under a bowl, then it's distinctiveness does not show and the darkness will grow and the light's influence is lost.

With that in mind, I want us to consider what Jesus seems to be communicating about influence. We've covered distinctiveness, so let's consider today the influence part. We will do this by asking three questions:

- What kind of influence does Jesus have in mind?
- Are we having that kind of influence?
- How do we lose that influence?

So then, let's consider that first question...

### ***What Kind of Influence Does Jesus Have in Mind?***

I think Jesus answers this question for us in the purpose clause we find in verse 16—“...so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.” So, it seems to me, the intended influence is one that creates worshipers of God. Do you see that? There is an action component and a reaction component. The action part relates to our good works in the world and the reaction we are hoping for is that others will see those good works and give glory to the Father, in other words they are drawn to worship God.

Now, this could be misunderstood. I don't think that Jesus is referring to any old good works. Again, it's good works that flow from the virtues and ethics He describes in the Sermon on the Mount. It's what we do when we are poor in spirit and pure in heart and merciful and meek and pursuing peace and so on. Those kinds of good works in view. Most of the time this passage is understood as a battle-cry for those with a heart for social justice issues, like feeding the poor, or advocating for the unborn, or equal opportunities in the workplace, or pursuing racial harmony, or visiting those in prison, or fighting against sex-trafficking, or caring for orphans, etc. Those are all good works. Those are all things that could be included under this banner. And we, as Christians, should be leading the way on all of those issues.

Having said that, it's more than that. You could do any one of those things and not a soul who notices would give glory to your heavenly Father, if they don't know why you are doing it. You can visit people in prison or feed the homeless regularly and people say, “wow, that person is so nice. Look at how they sacrifice their weekends to give of themselves for the good of others. That's amazing. How inspiring.” But it can stop there. All too often it does.

If those good works are going to lead to people glorifying your Father, then you usually need to connect the dots for them. You need to point to the Father in those actions. You need to use those actions as means to introduce people to your God. You need to show, *with your words*, that those deeds grow from Gospel seeds—“I give of myself for you because Christ gave himself for us. I love you even when society rejects you, because Christ has loved and accepted me even though I deserved to be rejected. I'm going to forgive and serve you, because that is what the Lord has done for me. Any good you see in this act flows from God's goodness to us in Christ. That's why I'm here. I want to help you today, but most of all I want you to know what Jesus has done to help you. Let me tell you some good news, it's called the Gospel...”

Do you see the difference? What good is it if we alleviate the temporary suffering of everyone we come into contact with and then they forfeit their soul for eternity in hell? God cares about all of our suffering, all human suffering, but especially our eternal suffering and that's why Jesus came and died for us. What good is it for us to love people and serve them, if we don't also tell them about how Jesus has loved them

and served them? Social justice and activism is very good work, but if the net result is going to be others “seeing your good works and giving glory to your Father in heaven” as Jesus described, then we are going to have to make explicit the connection between our good deeds and the good news of Jesus Christ. We cannot do that if we remain silent about Jesus. We must meet every physical need we possibly can for others, but not to the exclusion of their spiritual needs. If all people see from us is our good deeds and not the Gospel, then *we* might get a lot of glory in this life, but our heavenly Father may not be glorified in the hearts of those onlookers. And as Christians, ultimately, we should desire to see God glorified in and through our lives, amen?

So the goal of our Christian lives is for others to come to worship God. We will not be satisfied with any other temporary gain. We want people to recognize how lovely Jesus is and all that He has done for their salvation. That’s our goal. And Jesus indicates here that when we take Him seriously and follow His teaching there will be some who will be drawn to the Father in worship. That’s their reaction. That’s the influence. He’s calling us to a Christ-like distinctiveness for the sake of influence for the sake of the glory of God.

But please notice that’s only one of the two reactions Jesus mentions in this context. Did you notice that this passage is framed by two very different reactions to God’s people. It ends with the one we are hoping for, the positive response of others giving glory to God. But it is introduced with some sobering words about how some will respond to those who follow Christ. Look at verse 10...

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* (Matthew 5:10-12)

Do you see the point then? Some will respond positively to us when we follow Jesus; others will seek to do us harm. Some will be drawn to worship; others will despise us, slander us, and persecute us. Those are the two possible reactions that Jesus mentions. Naturally, again, the reaction and influence we are hoping for is the positive one described in verse 16. Every single one of us would pick that kind of influence, if we had the choice. But we don’t get to determine which or how much of each will be our lot in life. God will choose.

Let’s ask the second question now...

### ***Are We Having the Right Influence on the World?***

If the intended influence is one that God uses to create new worshipers of God, then are we seeing that here in American churches? The answer, generally speaking, is no. A resounding NO! Any statistics you consult bear witness to the decline of bodies in churches, new baptisms, and spiritual interest across the board in every denomination and every state. There are some churches that are growing, but the vast majority, in America, are not. It’s an inescapable reality.

That should make us curious. Does a decline necessarily indicate that the church is doing something wrong? No. Of course not! Jesus himself saw the crowds around Him decline on several occasions during His ministry. A missionary or a church can be faithfully holding out the Gospel and faithfully living out the Great Commandment and Great Commission and see no fruit for years. But generally speaking, when that is the case you do see an influx of persecution. They’re not seeing fruit because the Gospel is being rejected. When the Gospel is rejected, those proclaiming it tend to be as well. So there is certainly a

conceivable situation where a church is faithfully doing God's will and not seeing the fruit they long for in the community. But it is hard for me to imagine that situation in the absence of persecution.

So let's not fool ourselves. Generally speaking, most churches in America are not facing serious persecution. It has increased to be sure (and I will comment on that in a little while), but for the most part we have been pretty insulated from the severe persecution that the rest of the world's Christians experience on a regular basis. We've been the exception, not the norm.

So then here is the humbling reality churches in our setting have to take in. If we are not seeing the fruit Jesus is describing here and it's not because we are being rejected and facing persecution for Christ's sake, then more than likely it is because *we are the one's Jesus is talking about here*. We have lost or our losing our saltiness. We have been hiding our light under a bowl. This warning in Matthew 5 is for us! We are not seeing a positive reaction to the Gospel or a negative reaction to the Gospel because we are not giving people the Gospel to react to! That's the reason we are losing influence and have been for decades. And while churches were sitting comfortably and quietly, entertaining themselves and insulating themselves from the world, the forces of the evil one were hijacking the culture.

Make no mistake about it, the culture we live in today is not the culture of even ten years ago! So churches will not have the same experience in our society today as they did in previous decades. Biblical teaching once was the cultural norm in America, but on virtually every major issue today there has been a rapid flight away from clear biblical teaching.

Let me give you just one example. Take the issue of so-called same-sex marriage. Over half of all Americans live in states that affirm gay marriage. A recent Gallop poll measured the sentiments of Americans from 1996 to 2014. It showed that in less than two decades twice as many American today favor redefining marriage for legal purposes in such a way that allows for same-sex marriage. In 1996 those in favor were only 27%. In 2014, that number grew to 55%, the majority of Americans. But that doesn't even scratch the surface of how quickly the culture has shifted on that issue. That same research also demonstrated that nearly eight out of every ten individuals under the age of 30 affirm gay marriage.

This is the new normal. As the older generations die off, these percentages will increase substantially. Apart from a miraculous intervention of God in hearts and minds, the overwhelming majority of people will be in favor of something that the Bible describes as sin. And we all have sin. We all need Jesus just as bad as our practicing homosexual friends and loved ones. I'm not picking on any one variety of sinner (I just picked that sin because it's been such a hot topic in the media these days and the statistics are readily available). We all are just as guilty before the Lord and in need of a Savior every bit as much! I'm just trying to show how different the environment is for churches in our setting now.

What this means is that, apart from God sending a new Great Awakening in this country such that we have never known in our history, churches that hold to clear biblical teachings are increasingly going to be on the wrong side of the issues from society's perspective and, therefore, we will be increasingly marginalized and despised. Consider the implications of those new realities.

If we choose not to conform to the world and compromise on clear biblical teaching, then it's going to cost our churches something. It's going to cost Christians something. Two or three decades ago it was convenient in our setting to go to church and identify with Christ. That is no longer the case for the new generations. Even identifying with Christ is going to cost you something. It's going to mean being less popular. It may mean not getting the promotion you were hoping for. It may mean alienating family and friends that you care about. It may mean being slandered for the sake of Christ. It may mean your good works are met with the reaction Jesus describes in verses 10 to 12.

Dr. J. Paul Nyquist, who is the president of Moody Bible Institute, recently released a book called *Prepare: Living Your Faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*. It's a fabulous book. Therein he writes,

“People zealous for good can and do face persecution, because good acts expose wrong acts. Righteous deeds reveal unrighteous deeds. People want to avoid that embarrassment; they don't want their evil deeds unmasked and to be exposed as a wrongdoer. So they attack those doing good. They reframe the issue so it appears those who are doing good are actually doing evil. A stance against abortion is cast as robbing women of their reproductive rights. Support for traditional marriage is viewed as discrimination against homosexuals. In a fallen world, hostility happens.”<sup>1</sup>

Look, it's not going to get easier for us anytime soon. It's going to cost a someone in their 20s a lot more to identify with Christ and His church unashamedly today than it did for someone that same age a couple decades ago. It's going to cost you a lot more to share your faith with someone today than it did to share it with someone a couple decades ago. That's what the writing on the wall would seem to indicate. But if we want to see any movement in the opposite direction and any new worshipers in an increasingly hostile culture, then it's not going to come through abandoning the truth and remaining silent about the Gospel in the world. That's how we lost our influence in the first place. Which brings us to the third question...

### *How Do We Lose Our Influence?*

Well, look at what Jesus says. If salt and light are metaphors for influence and that influence flows through our distinctiveness coming in contact with the world, then we lose our influence when that doesn't happen. So we can lose our influence if we lose our saltiness, Jesus says. That's another way of saying we lose our distinctiveness. We stop taking serious the teaching of Jesus. It would be a lot more convenient for us in the short term to abandon the teaching of Jesus that run counter to current cultural polling, but if we do that we won't see new and true followers of Christ emerge, even if we see bigger churches. There should be a huge distinction between us and the world, if the world around us is not following Jesus. If there is not, then there is a problem with us. We're losing our saltiness. We are losing that distinctiveness. We are not following Jesus.

Another option is to maintain our convictions, but just remain silent. That's what Jesus is describing when he refers to a lamp being given light only to have that light hidden under a bowl. That makes no sense. Why would you light a lamp just to hide it? That would be like me coming hope in the middle of the night, turning all the lights on, and then preceding to unscrew every light bulb in the house one by one. Likewise, it makes no sense for us to be redeemed by Jesus and claim to be following Jesus when, in fact, we don't let anyone see the Jesus we claim to be following. We can hide our light. We blend in. We're camouflaged. We can refuse to speak truth in our world and keep our lips sealed when it comes to the Gospel, but obviously that is not what Jesus would want, right?

Nevertheless, we will be tempted to do both of those things more and more in the days ahead—either abandon the teachings of Jesus or hide ourselves from the world. And why might we do that? Because of fear. Fear of what it might cost us to associate with Jesus. Fear of what sharing our faith might mean for our wellbeing and popularity.

The reality is that many of us are *not* facing any form for persecution for Christ because we are not speaking for Him. You may be doing a lot of good things, but my suspicion is that most of you are pretty silent about the good news. Christians, when was the last time you shared the Gospel with someone? Have you ever? When was the last time you invited someone to come to church with you? Have you ever? Do

you regularly? Why not? Is it not because of fear? It's because you're not thinking clearly about the stakes of these spiritual matters. And that has got to change, not only for the life of the church but for your spiritual wellbeing. We are not going to grow as a church, if we don't have enough conviction about the Gospel and appreciation for what Jesus has done on the cross for our salvation to be bold enough to share Jesus with others and invite them have faith in Jesus as Savior and follow Him as Lord and join us in church.

There are a couple verses that have haunted me over the years in a good way. They say describe some of the response of Jesus' teaching. John writes...

*"...many even of the authorities believed in [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." (John 12:42-43)*

It's that last part that really grips me—"they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that come from God." That's ultimately what it comes down to. Do we want to see people glorify our Father in heaven? We would all say, "Yes! Amen!" But do we want it more than we want to preserve our own glory in the world? Would we lay down our reputations and glory for the glory of God in the world? If it came identifying with Jesus meant being shamed or mistreated in the world, would we compromise and hide our light, because we love the glory that comes from the world more than the glory that comes from God?

I know it can feel weird to talk to people about Jesus and to share the Gospel with people. It is a message about judgment and condemnation and an offer too good to be true after all. But the news is too good for us to keep to ourselves. In a book about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, J. D. Greear address the reality that talking to others about Jesus can, at times, make us feel weird. He tells an interesting story for perspective. Let me read it to you. He writes:

"I've heard evangelism defined as 'two nervous people talking to each other.' But here is the thing: Isn't the message *important* enough for a little weirdness? I heard a story several years ago about a man who was driving his car down an interstate outside of Los Angeles very late one evening. A significant earthquake rumbled through the region, and the man immediately pulled his car over to the side of the road to wait it out. The severe earthquake lasted just a few seconds, then ended. After the shaking stopped the man pulled his car back onto the road and took a left to cross a bridge over a river. As he began driving across the bridge, he noticed the taillights of the car in front of him suddenly disappear. He stopped his car, got out, and realized that a section of the bridge had fallen into the river below. The car in front of him had plunged nearly seventy-five feet into the water below.

The man turned around and saw several more cars headed toward the break. He began to wave his arms frantically, but people driving across a bridge outside of Los Angeles at 3 a.m. are not likely to stop for what looks like a crazy person on the side of the road. He watched helplessly as four drivers barreled right past him, off the bridge and to their deaths.

Then he saw a large bus coming toward the break. He decided that if that bus was going to go over the edge, it would have to take him with it. So he stood in the bus's path and waved his arms frantically. The bus honked its horn and flashed its lights, but the man would not move. The bus driver got out, saw the danger, and turned the bus so it blocked off the bridge.

Here's the question: What would you have done had you been the first one to see the break in the bridge? You probably would have done just what that man did—wave like a fool to get people to stop. Would you care that the observers thought you had lost your mind? Probably not. Why? Because you see something they don't—something that makes their ridicule insignificant.

To put it plainly, the gospel is worth the occasional awkwardness, or even the outright persecution, that goes along with sharing it...the message is important enough to take any opportunity to share it...The message is worth the weirdness. It's worth *anything*.”<sup>ii</sup>

He's right, you know. It's worth anything! Jesus is worth anything! Getting the Gospel to people is worth anything! We have to see this or we will continue to compromise. We have to be ready, because the cost of following Christ here is going to increase. Persecution will increase. Religious freedoms seem to be diminishing. We must be ready to love the world in spite of the mistreatment, because Jesus' love for them compels us. But it's not always going to be easy. In fact, I'm pretty sure in the years ahead it's going to be more challenging for the churches in America than ever in our nations history.

How's that for a nice, chipper, encouraging Sunday morning message? You feeling warm and fuzzy this morning? It probably feels like I began the service saying, “Welcome to church!” [mean deep voice], doesn't it? Yeah, I thought so. But am I wrong?

Nevertheless, take heart, even though Christians and churches are probably in for some more persecution in the years ahead, that's not all bad. It may thin the herd a bit, but God has a purpose in persecution and every major revival seems to follow pitiful seasons in the church.<sup>iii</sup> I do think there is hope. And I do believe that the Gospel is our hope and in it we find the power we need to effect change in our lives and world. The sooner we get that, the better.

But did you know that the Bible says that the persecuted are blessed on at least four occasions. We saw two of those verses here in Matthew 5. Jesus says, they are blessed because “*theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:10) and because their “*reward is great in heaven*” (5:11). In his first letter, Peter writes, “*but even if you should suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed*” (1 Peter 3:14) and then he calls us to be strong, ready, and faithful. And, of course, James, chapter 1, says “*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him*” (James 1:12).

If you study those passages carefully, and others like them, you find that persecution helps God's people know Christ more and identify with him better, it is rewarded by God if we are faithful in the midst of it, it makes us more like Christ, it produces in us spiritual fortitude, it historically is often used by God to fuel missions, it strengthens the church, and James even says it perfects our character. So God knows what He is doing. We should by no means despair. He will never abandon us in the midst of persecution. He will turn all things for good in His perfect timing. God wins! And He will prove to every one of us in time that Christ was worth anything that following Him cost us.

But, listen, following Him in this world means we really have to take seriously His teaching. So we have to listen attentively as we continue through the Sermon on the Mount. And as we live that out faithfully, don't be surprised when others “*see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven.*” It's going to happen, if you will let your light shine.

Will you do that this week? God's going to give you opportunities to tell people about Jesus this week and to share the difference He has made in your life. Don't jump under the bowl in those moments. God's going to give you opportunities to invite people with you to church this week. Seize them! Not the people, the opportunities (don't forcibly seize any people this week, that would be bad). You may have some awkward conversations, but wouldn't it be worth it if that leads in time to Jesus saving those people? Of course! So let your light shine this week. Don't be ashamed of Jesus. He was not ashamed of you. And don't be ashamed of the Gospel. The Bible says it's the power of God for the salvation of those who



believe! And when that motivates and fuels and comes through in our good works, we are going to see new people glorifying our God around us.

Do you believe that? If so, we will probably see some new faces in the pews next week and in the weeks to come...

Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> J. Paul Nyquist, *Prepare: Living Your Faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 113.

<sup>ii</sup> J. D. Greear, *Jesus, Continued...Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better than Jesus Beside You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

<sup>iii</sup> Nyquist, 174.