

God's World Changers

Our New Testament scripture is Matthew 5:13-16. Last Sunday we noted from the Beatitudes the "radically Christian life" that God blesses. The key to the blessed life is to acknowledge our absolute need for God's transforming love, which brings blessings that transform us into God's world changers.

I read **Matthew 5:13-16**:

¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.*

¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

I noted last Sunday my answer to an email from a friend who was unsettled by a book written by a missions leader who quite pointedly says that every professing Christian is called to be a radical Christian, and that radicalism is to be expressed through sacrificial giving and volunteering for mission causes. My response was that his challenge isn't radical enough. For me, the most radical thing I can do is to let Jesus make radical changes in my character, as I allow him to love me and love through me, changing old ways of thinking, relating, speaking and acting. In short, a radical Christian is blessed by God to bless others because of being made into the likeness of Jesus. And I can't escape this challenge, because here Jesus says, "*I am* the salt of the earth."

Jesus also declared himself, in one of his "I Am" sayings, to be "The Light of the World" (Jn. 8:12; 9:5). As the Co-Creator and eternal Son of God, Jesus is the un-derived Light, who gives the light of salvation understanding and the light of truth to all who believe and who receive him (Jn. 1:1-18). When God's Light shone in our hearts, we were given "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Although Jesus is The Light of the World, he shares his nature with us so that we too become, though imperfect and less in radiance, the light of the world. In fact, Paul doesn't say that we have the light but rather that we *are* light (Eph. 5:8ff).

Jesus didn't say that we're the gold, but rather the salt of the earth. Salt was and is a necessary but also an ordinary commodity. Jesus uses ordinary people, even the despised and lowly, as Paul emphasized to the Corinthians, who were prone to pride and prestige (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

All that's necessary to be God's salt and light in the world is to put on Christ and have him living in us. God's new order is revolutionary (Willard). The Beatitudes list the many ways we're blessed and are congratulated by God for receiving these virtues and trusting him even during times of persecution. What an amazing privilege it is for us ordinary people to be called out of darkness into God's light in order to be his light and

salt in the earth! We're saved by grace to become God's people who'll serve and glorify him forever (1 Pet. 2:9).

William Barclay says that Jesus paid a supreme compliment when he called us the salt of the earth, which stresses "someone's solid worth and usefulness," giving rise to the compliment that declares, "So and so is the salt of the earth." In Scripture, salt can have both positive and negative connotations, but in this context Jesus is speaking of the benefits of saltiness. In 1st Century Palestine, the only way to preserve food from spoiling and decay was through salt. Even to this day, salt is used to preserve meats and fish. Salt also was and still is important to lend flavor to certain foods. And our lives and even our speech are to influence others and to add a good flavor to life and society around us (Col. 4:6).

Some so-called believers think of themselves as being in Jesus' "Secret Service," although no such alternative lifestyle exists for a true follower of Jesus. Sadly, the longer a person is a Christian, the fewer non-Christian friends she or he will have. And we teach, at least covertly and indirectly, that the more devoted you are to Christ, the more time you'll spend with fellow believers, engaged in church activities and the less time you will have to be among the unchurched "pagan." But we're indeed to live in the world and are to courageously make a difference in the world.

Charles Allen tells about a young man, a professing Christian, "who went to work a summer in a lumber camp. Some of his friends told him that those rough lumbermen would make life miserable for him because of his religious faith. Bravely he went and spent the summer. When he came home, his friends asked how he made out. 'Did they laugh at your being a Christian?' He said, 'No, they did not laugh at me because of my being a Christian. They never did find it out.'"

As God's salt of influence, we're at work in the world, making meaningful contacts and forming friendships of unconditional love with unbelievers. This was Paul's strategy, becoming all things to all people so that by all possible means he might win some to Christ (1 Cor. 9:22). God will use us as his representatives, as his presence in the fallen world, in desperate need of his healing, preserving and flavoring presence.

With the combination of our identity as salt and light, we penetrate and permeate the world but also are distinctly different from the world, as light is distinct from darkness. In Scripture, darkness is more than the absence of light, but represents chaos and evil, the absence of the good, of the presence of God, who can make all things good. Jesus says that God's world changers are in the world but not of it. In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus asked that the Father would not take them out of the world but that he would protect them from the evil one. In fact, his strategy was to send them into the world while remaining distinctly different from the world (John 17:15ff).

Light is different from the darkness of the world, as day is from night. The Beatitudes (3-12) are a description of the distinctly different character of Jesus followers, whose difference is evident to the world around us. It's not like the world to be poor in spirit or

to mourn over sin or the needs of others. It's totally counter-cultural to be meek in the world that seeks after pride and self-will. The world hungers for many things and lusts for more, but God's lights hunger and thirst for righteousness. It's not like the world to be merciful or pure in heart or to make peace between warring factions. And all of these distinct virtues lend themselves to a life of persecution "because of righteousness" (10).

Remarkably, Jesus says that we're the light of the world, and our presence, as we live a godly life in Christ Jesus, will be disturbing to those around us. That's why Paul says that we'll be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). Those in darkness and who choose to remain in darkness would rather not have us around them. It's not as comfortable for them to tell their dirty stories and plot their dishonest schemes in our presence. Like salt, we can be an irritant to others, like salt rubbed into a wound.

There was something about Jesus, the holiest person ever to walk the earth that made him also attractive to those who were "of doubtful reputation." Although he was holy, he also was attractive and welcoming to the world's outcasts and admitted sinners. I like what the late pastor/theologian John Stott said in his commentary on our being Jesus' "light of the world." He cited the well-known English nursery rhyme and noted "How splendid it would be if non-Christians would inquire of us this way:

*Twinkle, twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are."*

If only those around us would be drawn to us and would wonder what we have that seems to be missing in their lives. Paul seemed to be thinking the same thing when he wrote to a somewhat troubled and divided church that they should live blameless lives that shine like stars on a cloudless night (Phil. 2:15).

God doesn't require us to become salt and light by our own efforts at self-improvement. He transforms us by his grace and he is faithful to make us the salt and the light he wants us to be. Imperfect as we are, if we're in love with Jesus, he'll be faithful to make us his salt and light, even with all of our flaws. As salt, we'll always be a little bit soiled. And as light, sometimes we'll give just a faint twinkle. But even with our imperfection and our weakness, God is faithful to pour us out and to make us shine in the right places. God is faithful and he calls us to be faithful in the work of being his salt and light. It's more what and whose we are rather than what we do. If we're really God's salt and light then the tasks will follow.

We're called to be God's presence in the world and to give ourselves away for the sake of the world. Salt permeates into a substance and loses its identity. It dies to itself. It is unobtrusive and invisible and never calls attention to itself. No one, eating a great meal, says, "This is the best salt I've ever eaten." Salt simply does its work by disappearing into the substance it heals, preserves or flavors.

Light does its work silently, effectively leading people from darkness to the Light of the World, Jesus. We are not called to be God's glorious chandeliers, drawing attention to ourselves. Rather, we are like a single, unadorned light bulb along a dark corridor, showing the way to the throne room of Jesus. Being God's salt and light isn't so much about our efforts for God as it is about quietly walking with God and practicing his presence.

Moses, who after being with God on the mountain and then returning to the people, wasn't aware that his face shone (Ex. 34:29-35). Paul referred to this experience of Moses and said that we as followers of Jesus are experiencing an even more radical transformation than a glowing face. The Spirit of God is transforming us and making us more like Jesus, not only in our countenance, but also in our character (2 Cor. 3:18). The face of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, shone like an angel as he was being interrogated by the Sanhedrin. But like Moses, he wasn't aware of it. It was a reflection of his godly character.

As one preacher said, "I doubt if Stephen ever attended a face-shining seminar" (H Robinson). And we too don't have to attend seminars to fabricate a certain look or try to make a certain show of godliness. We simply have to walk with Jesus in the Spirit, loving, serving and sharing with others as God's salt and light, taking the way of the cross, which is the way that most glorifies God (Bonhoeffer).

From the time of the first disciples who followed Jesus, God's salt and light have been working effectively. Credible historians acknowledge the impact of the Christian faith and the church on issues such as the defense of the previously helpless in society, such as the establishment of women's rights and the protection of children and important laws against slavery and child labor. Hospitals, orphanages and other institutions that care for the sick and needy were begun primarily by followers of Jesus. Spiritual awakenings saved societies and nations from bloody revolutions. And today God will use his people to be his voice for needy refugees, despite government restrictions.

Like salt, our counter-cultural lives are to permeate society in order to prevent moral decay. But as followers of Christ, we're not called to control secular power structures, nor are we promised that we can Christianize government legislation and the values of this fallen world. Rather, we are to remain "active preservative agents, indeed irritants," in calling the world to heed God's standards (Blomberg). God is at work, even when we see little evidence. Dale Heights has many effective ministries for such a small church, yet the most effective way to make an impact in this community is to simply become salt and light by the way we live as radical Christians, being loved by God and loving others.

The late Mother Teresa, the "Saint of Calcutta," shared a story from her remarkable life of loving service to the poor and the dying, on this occasion to the Aborigines of Bourke, Australia. She visited a man who lived alone in a small one-room shack "made of tin and old card board and so on." After much insistence from Teresa, the man allowed her to make his bed, wash his clothes and clean his room.

She relates:

After I cleaned the room I found in the corner of the room a big lamp full of dirt and I said, "Don't you light this lamp, such a beautiful lamp. Don't you light it?" He replied, "For whom? Months and months and months nobody has ever come to me. For whom will I light it?" So I said, "Won't you light it if the Sisters come to you?" And he said "Yes." So the sisters started going to him for only about 5 to 10 minutes a day, but they started lighting that lamp. After some time he got into the habit of lighting. Slowly, slowly, slowly, the sisters stopped going to him....Then I forgot completely about that, and then after two years he sent word—"Tell Mother, my friend, the light she lit in my life is still burning."

May God use us to be his always-burning lamps, his lights in the world, as his salt and light that will change the world!