

The Power and Purpose of Our Witness to the World

Matthew 5:13-16

Introduction 1) John Stott said at the Cape Town Lausanne Conference, “The greatest hindrances to the advance of the gospel worldwide is the failure of the lives of God’s people” (quoted in *Expect Great Things*, p.27). An anonymous author adds, “The reason some folks don’t believe in missions is that the brand of religion they have isn’t worth propagating.” It is in this context that I want us to carefully reflect on King Jesus’s reminder that He redeemed us and brought us into His Kingdom to be “the salt of the earth” (v.13) and “the light of the world” (v.14). You see, our brand of religion is worth propagating.

2) Matthew 5:13-16 flows naturally out of the Beatitudes of 5:1-12. Taking on and exhibiting the character of the Beatitudes is what makes it possible for us to be salt and light on the earth, in the world, among the nations. In fact there is an important and eternal truth we must never forget: those who love and follow King Jesus are the only real salt this world will ever taste and the only authentic light it will ever see! Jesus’s words in these verses take it as an undeniable truth that we live in a decadent, decaying, dark world. Where there is decay we need salt. Where there is darkness we need light. We, citizens of the Kingdom of heaven (5:10), are God’s plan to stop death and stamp out darkness. This plan finds its

crescendo in the last words, of the last chapter in this gospel with what we know and call “The Great Commission” (28:18-20). To the nations we go as salt and light.

3) These verses are easy to outline. Verse 13 is about Christians being the salt of the earth to a decaying world. Verses 14-16 are about Christians being light to a world in darkness. Keith Green said “This generation is responsible for this generation of souls on the earth.” We then are to be salt and light, right now, today, during the life God gives us, on the earth and to the world.

I. Be salt to a world in decay 5:13

1) Verses 13-16 should be read in the context of verses 11-12. Citizens of the kingdom are to be witnesses to the world. We should expect that this “witness gives rise to persecution” (Carson, *Sermon on the Mount*, 29). Taking a stand for Jesus and His righteousness will not always be applauded. We expect to be reviled and persecuted just like the “prophets who were before us. Rejoice and be glad.” You stand in good company and you have “a great reward awaiting you in heaven.” Is it worth it taking a stand and be a witness for Jesus? Our Lord has a clear and resounding answer. “Yes, it is!”

2) In contrast to those who oppose the work of Christ in the world, kingdom citizens are called by God to be two things: 1) salt that purifies and preserves

and 2) light that shines and vanquishes the darkness. I like what Robert Mounce says, “If the Beatitudes leave the impression that life in the kingdom is somewhat passive, the metaphors of salt and light correct such a misunderstanding. Salt permeates and performs its vital function in society. Light illumines the darkness and points people to the One who is the source of all light and “life” (Robert Mounce, *Matthew, NIBC*, 42-43). What does Jesus tell us about being salt scattered across the earth?

1) Don't lose your purity

1) Jesus declares of his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth.” You is emphatic in the original text. The idea is, “you, and no one else, are the salt of the earth” (Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 80). And note, it is not you will be or you can be. You are the salt of the earth. Today, right now, you are salt.

2) Salt had a number of functions in the ancient world, at least 5.

These are 1) purity, 2) preservation, 3) flavor, 4) healing and 5) create thirst. Followers of Jesus can and should be all of these, but it seems that the primary ideas are of purifying and preserving. Chuck Quarles notes, “The use of salt as a purifying agent overlaps somewhat with the use of salt as a preservative. Salt preserved because it first

purified...Nevertheless, the use of salt as a purifying agent is primary in 5:13..." (Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 80).

3) Scattered out among the nations on the earth, Christians are to bear faithful witness to the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ by the lives we live. Our talk and our walk match up! A pure life brings power to our proclamation. Because we are "pure in heart" (5:8) we are pure in life.

4) Perhaps no one exhibited this more than China missionary Eric Liddell during his last years in a Japanese P.O.W. camp in Weihsein, China during World War II. Fellow missionary David Mitchell said Liddell's "faithful and cheerful support made the difference for many in the camp. Otherwise, they would not have survived." Mitchell asked, "What was his secret?" His answer:

"He unreservedly committed his life to Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. That friendship meant everything to him. By the flickering light of a peanut-oil lamp, early each morning he and a roommate in the men's cramped dormitory studied the Bible and talked with God for an hour. As a Christian, Eric Liddell's desire was to know God more deeply, and as a missionary, to make him known more fully. And this he did both in life and death." (*Ten Who Changed the World*), 134-35).

2) Don't lose your usefulness

1) Salt is good as long as it maintains its integrity. However, salt in the ancient world was susceptible to becoming contaminated and impure (Carson, *Matthew, EBC*, 169). It could “lose its taste” and its saltiness could not be restored. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* writes, “If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?” Of course the answer is they won't, at least not from the one who no longer lives a godly and pure life. The result is you have become useless to the kingdom, “no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.” Luke 14:34-35 provides a parallel to this verse where we read, “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

2) Compromise is a deadly cancer to our witness to the world.

Seduced by the sirens of materialism, political expediency, irresponsible rhetoric, moral laxity or foolish actions, the attractiveness and beauty of the Christian life is lost. However, maintain your commitments and convictions to Christ with grace and humility and people will inevitably take notice. They will be

drawn to you. I have seen this repeatedly on the mission field and here in America by the way a follower of Christ as a husband loves and serves his wife. It stands out because it is so different from the norm. It adds a wonderful flavor. There is a unique quality. It is useful to the Kingdom not useless.

As the Savior's salt we are to infiltrate the earth with the seasoning of godliness, fairness, holiness, justice and righteousness. God's people should be known both for their courage and convictions, but also their compassion, grace, humility and love towards others.

David Dockery is right, "Salt is only useful when it gives of itself" (*Seeking the Kingdom*, 36).

II. Be light to a world in darkness 5:14-16

1) Amy Carmichael (1867-1951), famous and faithful missionary to India wrote in her journal after hearing Hudson Taylor describe the massive lostness of the world, "Does it not stir our hearts to go forth and help them, does it not make us long to leave our luxury, our exceeding light, and go to them that sit in darkness?"

2) Jesus tells his disciples, "You are the light of the world." There is a rich background to this idea in the Old Testament. It stood for revelation,

instruction, hope, joy, righteousness, salvation and “the radiance of divine presence” (Quarles, *Sermon on the Mount*, 84). Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 describes Messiah, the Servant of the Lord as, “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth” (see also Isa. 60-61). Jesus brings all of this together in Himself when He declares in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world” (cf. 9:5; 12:35). Now, in what is truly a remarkable and stunning declaration, He looks at His disciples and applies this same image to them! To us! We who follow King Jesus reflect the Greater Light of Christ and in doing so point others to Him! What a privilege. What a responsibility. I love how Chuck Quarles puts it so clearly, “the shining light is a metaphor of the Messiah and His people fulfilling the missionary purpose of manifesting the glory of God among the nations” (Ibid). Now lest we be unsure of what this means for us, Jesus provides two examples for our instruction.

1) Learn from the example of light on a hill 5:14

- Charles Spurgeon says, “Christ has lighted us that we might enlighten the world....God intends his grace to be as conspicuous as a city built on the mountain’s brow” (*Matthew*, 41).
- God did not redeem us and call us into his kingdom to hide us. He did not save us to be silent saints! “We are (the pronoun is emphatic) and no one else is the light of the world.” We are to be

the bright light for all to see when the clouds obscure the stars and moon and the darkness is so thick you can cut it with a knife and feel it in your bones. This light is to have a global impact among the nations. We are the light of /to the world. We manifest and put on display among the nations the goodness, greatness and glory of God. Such brilliant light against the backdrop of the darkness of sin “is not able to be hidden” (Quarles, 88). In what we say and how we live we will reflect the light of Him who is the Light of the World.

- Oh how we must guard our tongues and give attention to our actions. God gives us an influential position, like a light on a hill that safely guides people safely home. This light is not for a few. It is for the world! It should attract. It should give direction. It should stand out near and far. John Calvin put it like this, “Seeing that God has given us such a treasure and so inestimable a thing as his word we must employ ourselves to it as much as we can that it may be kept safely and sound and not perish. And let every man be sure to lock it securely in his own heart. But it is not enough to have an eye for his own salvation, but the knowledge of God must shine generally

through the whole world” (Quoted in Steve Timmis, *Multiplying Churches*, pgs. 73-74).

- My mother, Emma Lou Akin, was such a light. How do I know?
When people were hurting they asked Emma to pray for them.
When they needed advice, they sought Emma’s counsel.
Sometimes they made fun of her and her Christian ways, but when they were in trouble, they sought her out! She was a light on a hill for all to see!

2) Learn from the example of light in a house 5:15-16

- Missionary to the American Indians, David Brainerd, died at the age of 29. Reflecting on his life and calling from God, he said, “Here am I, send me to the ends of the earth; send me to the rough, the savage lost of the wilderness, send me from all that is called comfort on earth; send me to death itself, if it be but in your service, and to promote your kingdom.”
- The word light occurs 4 times in verses 14-16. It is put on a hill for the whole world to see. It is put on a stand in the house to illuminate the entire home. No one would ever think to light an oil lamp and then hide it under “a basket” (*NIV*, “bowl”), a clay container. That is nonsense, even comical. I can imagine the

disciples chuckling at such an idea. No, the purpose of a lamp is to give light. The purpose of a disciple of Jesus is to provide light. By a holy life and a bold witness you will shine bright and far, impacting more people than you might imagine.

- A little light makes a big impact in a dark place! Jesus says when your light shines before others, they will see your good works (think the Beatitudes of 5:3-12). A righteous life and bold witness is a powerful combination! You cannot ignore it. Again, some will revile you and persecute you (v. 11) just like they did the prophets (v.12). Others, however, will be mesmerized by your witness and “give glory to your Father in heaven.” Note: they glorify the Father not you. They attribute what they see to God in you. The followers of Jesus are not the source or origin of these good works, only the conduit, the channel. God gets the glory through my transformed life and faithful witness to his work of grace in my life. The spotlight is not on us. The spotlight is where it should be: on Him.

- Some questions to ponder:

- 1) Does fear of man keep you from shining brightly for Jesus among the nations?

- 2) Does pride keep you from shining brightly for Jesus among the nations?
- 3) Does sin keep you from shining brightly for Jesus among the nations?
- 4) Does comfort keep you from shining brightly for Jesus among the nations?
- 5) Does peer pressure keep you from shining brightly for Jesus among the nations?
- 6) Does parental expectations keep you from shining brightly for Jesus among the nations?
- 7) Does your ambitions and agendas keep you from shining brightly for Jesus among the nations?

Conclusion

1) Ion Keith-Falconer (1856-1887) was a Scottish missionary and Arabic scholar who died at the age of 31. He won the world cycling championship in 1878 at the age of 22, but would leave all that and go to Egypt and later Yemen as a missionary for Jesus. He died from malaria after being married to his missionary wife Gwendolen for only 3 years. In the foreword to his biography, Robert Sinker wrote, “A career of exceptional promise was early closed in the death of Ion Keith-Falconer. The beauty of his character, his ardent missionary

zeal, his great learning, form a combination rarely equaled...How noble a life his was.” What was it, in this man, that would cause him to give up all for the glory of King Jesus and the lost among the nations? I suspect it was this conviction buried deep in his heart that settled the issue!

“I have but one candle of life to burn, and I would rather burn it out in a land filled with darkness than in a land flooded with light.”

2) As was true of John Keith-Falconer, may it also be true of us, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine!”