

Salt & Light

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[0:00] Over the past few weeks, we've been asking what kind of relationship Christians ought to have with the surrounding culture. Questions like, how much should we withdraw from culture versus how much should we engage with the culture?

Should Christians completely refrain from getting involved in politics? Or should we be pushing to get Christians into public office? Or to get Christian ethics into public policy?

How do we think about raising kids in a world where people have such divergent views about what it means to be a human being? So we've been asking these questions together.

And as we saw last week, Christians have historically disagreed over how to answer these questions. And there are various views that we said by themselves tend to have weaknesses and be short-sighted.

But that together, the best approach is an approach that holds together this tension, this balance of withdrawal and engagement.

[1:02] A rhythm of gathering and scattering. And some of the most helpful teaching on this comes from Jesus himself. We see this in Matthew chapter 5, where Jesus uses two famous, very well-known metaphors to describe the impact that Christians are meant to have in the world.

And these are the images of salt and light. Christians are salt and light for the world. So we're going to look at that this morning together. And we're going to see first what Jesus means by this.

And second, what this means for us as a church. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we pray that it would be salt and light for us.

That we would be enriched and illuminated as we open your word by the power of your spirit. That we would know how to faithfully live as your people in this world for your glory.

And it's in your son's name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, what is Jesus saying? What does he mean in this passage? At first, it seems fairly obvious when you think about salt and light.

[2:07] Those are pretty self-explanatory. But what we need to do is to try to understand how people would have heard this in the first century. So salt, we think of salt primarily as a seasoning for food.

And certainly that was part of it. But in the ancient world, salt had two other uses that were actually far more important than seasoning. First, salt was very commonly used as a preservative.

These are the days before we had refrigerators. And so they needed to have ways of keeping food from going bad, from rotting. And so one of the best ways was to take salt and to work it into meat.

And that would preserve it against decay. So it was a preservative. Salt was also used. Various salt compounds were used as fertilizer. In a primarily agrarian society, salt was very central and was used not only to kill weeds, but also to nourish the soil and promote the growth of the crops that they were trying to grow.

And so we have salt being used as a preservative and as a fertilizer. So Jesus is saying that Christians are like salt in the society. They preserve against decay and they promote the growth of all that is good and true and beautiful.

[3:27] So that's the first image. The second image he uses, he shifts a bit and he says that Christians are the light of the world in verse 14. And in the Bible, the word light is often used as a metaphor for truth.

And certainly that is what Jesus has in mind here. But the image is much richer than that. Because Jesus goes on to say, a city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

And we think, well, that's an odd transition to go from talking about Christians being light, where we would think of a lamp, to talking about a city being on a hill. But we have to realize that when Jesus made this reference, every single person listening immediately thought of the same city.

And that's the city of Jerusalem, which is actually located on a hill. And what we need to understand is, in the ancient world, there are no streetlights.

And so if you're out in the wilderness at night, it would be fairly dark. And yet, if you were a traveler, and imagine you're a traveler traveling in the wilderness, and you came around a corner, and you saw for the first time at night, Jerusalem, the city on a hill.

[4 : 36] And if you were to see that at night, what you would see is, in the midst of all the blackness, in the midst of all the darkness, you would see not just one or two lights, but thousands of lights. Thousands of lamps, and lanterns, and torches, and fires.

And you would see that gleaming on the horizon. And in the ancient world, with no other lights around, it would be possible to see the lights of Jerusalem for miles around.

And if you were a traveler in the ancient world, and you saw something like that, that would have all kinds of meaning for you. You would see those lights, and you would say, there's a refuge for me to get me out of the darkness, and into a place where I will be safe.

I'm going to be safe there. You would see that, and you would say, that's a place where I'm going to find warmth. I'm going to find hospitality. There's going to be other people there. I'm going to find community.

I'm going to get the things that I need to survive there. And so if we think about all of this, these are very rich metaphors that Jesus is using to describe the Christian community. So essentially what he's saying is, in this world, there is decay.

[5 : 44] Things are breaking down. There's a decay of justice. There's economic decay. There's familial decay. There's social decay. There's the decay of race relationships.

There are governments and nations, no matter how powerful they are, over time all nations fade. They all decay. And so he's saying this is a world where there's decay.

This is a world where the soil is hard. This is a world where there are weeds and rocks and stones and not much grows. He's saying this is a world where there's darkness, where there are lies, where there's deception and people are self-deceived, where there's loneliness, where there's isolation, where there's confusion and alienation.

And Jesus is saying that when his followers, when followers of Jesus are scattered throughout society, when Christian communities exist within every community around the world, those communities preserve against decay.

They create the conditions for life to flourish. They promote the growth and the flourishing of all that is good and true and beautiful.

[6 : 54] They offer a refuge from the darkness. They become places of hospitality and community and connection and safety. So this is a beautiful vision of what the Christian community is in the world.

And, you know, if you look at history, there are numerous examples of the church doing just this kind of thing in society. Just to give you one example, in Roman society, sex was often something that freeborn men used to dominate women and slaves.

And when a woman was raped in this society, the great loss from a male perspective was not the trauma or the violation or the violence.

The great loss from the male perspective is that that woman had lost her virginity and was no longer considered marriageable. The preference in this society for male babies meant that many of the female infants that were born were killed or they were left out, they were exposed and left to die.

And so at one point, the ratio of men to women in Rome was about 130 men for every 100 women. It got that bad. And in this society, when women lost their husbands, they were forced by the government to remarry or they would have to pay fines because the government didn't want to have to support them financially.

[8 : 20] And so we hear these kinds of things and we're horrified by this. And in our society, in our culture, we look back and we ask, how could things ever have been this way? But the real question, the question that historians ask is, why did things ever change?

How did we get from a society like that to a culture like ours with the Me Too movement? And the answer, quite simply, is that Christians were salt and light in that society.

Even though they were ridiculed, even though they were persecuted for their strange ethics, for their bizarre way of life, they began to transform their society by being salt and light in the midst of the culture.

So Christians started teaching that sex should only happen within the confines of marriage. And so when men converted and became Christians, they were told that they should only have sex with their wives and that they could no longer visit the brothels or sleep with the temple prostitutes or sleep with their slaves, which was very countercultural in Roman society.

The Christians were the ones who began to take in the widows. They began to take the unwanted children who were left out and exposed and raise them as their own. And they also told widows that they didn't have to remarry if they didn't want to, that the Christian community would be their family and take care of them.

[9 : 43] They gave dignity to every single human being, regardless of their race or their gender or their social status, because they saw everyone as being made in the image of God.

They taught that not only do men have authority over their wives' bodies, which is something that everybody believed, but they also taught the radical idea that wives also have authority over their husbands' bodies, which was unheard of at the time.

They eventually expanded sexual ethics to cover and protect slaves and women as well. And so the interesting thing is, by many people's perspective these days, Christian sexual ethics are backwards or prudish.

But at this time in history, they were radical and revolutionary. And I don't think we can overestimate how massive this shift was for Western civilization.

The classicist, Kyle Harper, says that this was the world's first and possibly greatest sexual revolution ever. And in fact, there's a growing body of research that says that all of our fundamental assumptions in Western civilization about universal human equality and inalienable human rights, that all of this is not rooted in the Enlightenment, but it came directly out of the Judeo-Christian influence on Western civilization.

[11 : 13] It's rooted in the Judeo-Christian faith. And so this is what Jesus is saying. He's saying Christian communities are meant to be this for the world. They act as salt and light in a culture with decay and darkness.

So now we need to ask, what does this mean for us as we fast forward and we look at the present day and we look around at the culture that God has placed us in? How do we think about what the church is called to be in this culture?

And I would put it like this. The church community is meant to be a place of counterformation for the common good. A place of counterformation for the common good.

So I want to break down that phrase in a little more detail. First, I want to talk about counterformation. When Jesus says that Christians are salt and light for the world, what he's really saying is it is in society's best interest to allow Christians to be different.

He's saying it is in the best interest of the city to allow Christians to be different, to not play by the same rules or live by the same standards. And so this is one of the reasons why religious freedom is so vital.

[12 : 30] And some of you work on issues of religious freedom, and that work is vital for ensuring that Christians can continue to be distinct from the surrounding culture.

Absolutely important. But the freedom to be different only matters if you're actually different. And that is really the point that Jesus is making here.

Freedom of expression seems a bit hollow when Christians express themselves with every bit as much contempt and mockery and hostility as anyone else in society.

The freedom to hold different views about sexuality or marriage seems pretty hollow when Christian leaders keep getting accused of sexual misconduct. Jesus says for salt to be effective, it has to be salty.

It can't lose its saltiness. In other words, it has to be distinct. It has to be chemically different from the meat in order to be effective. Now, chemically speaking, salt can't actually lose its saltiness.

[13 : 36] But in the ancient world, with no refineries, salt could actually very easily become diluted with lots of other compounds that may look like salt, but they were in fact not much more than road dust.

And so what does this mean for us? Well, it means that we are all being spiritually formed all the time. All right, so formation is not optional for human beings.

Whether you're a Christian or don't know what you believe, we are all being formed all the time. Things like the 24-hour news cycle, things like social media, they are spiritually forming us all the

time.

And so the gospel is always in danger of becoming diluted by the values and the idols that hold sway in our culture.

And in a couple of weeks, we're going to talk about that in much more detail. But things like individualism or consumerism or materialism or the political idolatry that so many people have been taken up with or progressivism.

[14 : 43] These things can seep into the church. They can seep into the Christian life, and they can begin to dilute the gospel. And this is, of course, not something that is just now happening. It's something that has always happened since the earliest days of the church.

And staying salty means staying committed to the gospel no matter what. A great example of this comes about 100 years ago. For those of you who are familiar with church history, you'll know about this.

But about 100 years ago, there was a massive controversy in the church over the authority of Scripture. And on one side, you had these German academics who were saying, Well, now that we have science and now that we better understand how the world works, we now know that miracles aren't real.

And we now know that the supernatural doesn't really exist. And we now know that things like resurrection aren't really possible. And these ideas about sin and judgment are offensive.

And so what we need to do is to revise and update the Christian faith so it will fit and align with our modern views. And then on the other side, you have the traditionalists.

[15 : 47] And the traditionalists are saying, Listen, our faith has lasted 1,900 years. The same gospel has existed in different communities and different cultures all around the world for hundreds and hundreds of years.

We see no need to modify the gospel to fit this current cultural context because this is the gospel that's been passed down since Christ first gave it to the apostles.

And if you lived back then, you would have been sure, you would have put all your money on the fact that the traditionalists were going to lose, that they're the ones who were going to die out eventually.

And yet here we are today, and when we look around today, the churches that embraced a modernized, deluded, progressive theology, those denominations are dying out.

And in fact, Washington, D.C. is filled with big, beautiful, empty church buildings. These are relics of dying denominations that lost their saltiness.

[16 : 53] The gospel got so diluted that they lost their saltiness. And the churches, on the other hand, who held fast to the gospel that was first preached to the apostles, the churches that held fast to the original gospel, those are the churches that are renting those buildings.

And there are more people coming to faith in Christ in churches like that, especially in places like the Global South. There are more people coming to faith in churches like that right now than at any point ever in human history, because they stayed salty.

They continue to be salt and light in the world. And so Christians need strong, thick, countercultural practices that keep us from losing our saltiness.

And it's vital to be deeply rooted in a gospel-centered church community. That example that I gave a moment ago is an example that I got from a guy named Darren Whitehead.

That's just one of many examples of this kind of thing happening throughout history. Christians losing their saltiness and dying out, and other Christians staying salty by clinging to Christ and the gospel.

[18 : 08] And so what I mean as we think about our church, we're not just talking about the importance of tuning into church once or twice a month or listening to sermons.

What we're talking about is being deeply invested in a church community. We are talking about serving and using your gifts. We are talking about meeting in triads or core groups and seeking, prioritizing, building Christian friendships with people who are going to actually hold you accountable, who love Jesus and who love you and who want you to grow in your faith.

We're talking about becoming a member in our church or whatever church you are a part of so that you can come under the accountability of that community. We're talking about committing yourself to personal spiritual disciplines of growth.

Any hope of counter-formation that we have is going to require a high level of commitment, especially during COVID when we are spending so much time online and we are being formed all the time.

So this is the first part of this. This is what we mean by counter-formation. But of course, that counter-formation actually has a larger purpose behind it. And the purpose of our counter-formation is so that we can seek the common good together.

[19 : 29] And this is that balance of gathering and scattering, of gathering together in the church and then being sent out to every corner of society. Because in order to be salt and light, we have to go where there's decay and darkness.

That's the way it works. We have to remember that in order for salt to be effective, it has to be worked into every square inch of the meat.

And in the same way, Christians need to be present in every square inch of society, especially where there is decay and darkness.

And what's so amazing is that when I look around our community, I see all kinds of amazing examples of people doing just this kind of thing.

There are some people in our church who looked around at one point and realized that very few of their neighbors knew each other. And so they got some of their neighbors together and planned to host a block party for their street.

[20 : 29] And that became an annual tradition. And other neighbors stepped in and took the lead in making sure it kept happening. And before long, all of the neighbors knew each other and friendships were being formed between people who didn't even know each other's names a few years earlier.

That's being salt and light in your community. Many of you are facing financial uncertainty and some of you have lost your jobs and nobody really knows how bad things are going to get. And yet, many of you have given to our COVID relief fund. And through your generosity, we've been able to give away over \$45,000 to help pay rent, to pay mortgages, to pay utility bills, to buy food and essentials for people who need it all around this community, right?

That's being salt and light. That's preserving against decay. Some of you give your time to mentor children or serve at Little Lights.

And others of you serve with the DC 127 Foster Care and Adoption Ministry. And you open up your homes and your friends and your families to receive children who need a home and who need a family, sometimes for short term, sometimes for longer term periods of time.

[21 : 42] That's being salt and light. Many of you are committed to learning more about policies that perpetuate racial inequity. And you're committed to building friendships across racial and ethnic lines because you're committed to reconciliation.

That's being salt and light in this community. A family in our church is deeply committed to evangelism in their neighborhood. And so they host an annual Christmas party every year where they share the gospel with their friends and neighbors.

And they host neighborhood Bible studies that they invite their neighbors to because they want them to know about Jesus. That is being salt and light in the community. Some of you live in group homes where you have built intentional communities between married people and families, people with kids, and married people who don't have kids, and then single people who are not married, all living together.

And that's because your vision of family is not just limited to nuclear families. You have a much larger gospel-driven vision of what families can be. That is being salt and light in this community. There was a woman in our church who was publicly criticized online for her Christian faith by another parent at school.

[23 : 04] And instead of responding with anger or defensiveness or hostility or simply avoiding this person, she invited him to sit down with her and to share his concerns and heard him out and has since made it her mission to befriend him.

That is being salt and light. There was a man who was on a partner track in a corporate law firm who began to realize that the long hours he was working, that that was doing harm to his marriage and to his family, his desire to be a father who's present with his children.

And so he made the sacrificial decision to cut down his hours. He gave up on his dream of becoming partner so that he could prioritize his family. That is being salt and light.

Years ago, we commissioned and sent out a family to go live in the Persian Gulf region, to give their lives long-term, to living there, to building deep friendships, to sharing the gospel, and to planting churches in a place where very few people follow Jesus and where the gospel is not preached. That is being salt and light. All right, so all of these examples, and I could go on and on and on and on. It's fascinating. Nick Kristof, who writes in the New York Times, occasionally writes articles about Christians, even though he's not one, and he has not been ashamed to criticize Christians on a number of levels.

[24 : 31] But also, there have been several times when he has said something along these lines, where he has almost reluctantly had to admit that wherever he goes, anywhere in the world, he says, wherever there is the greatest suffering, whenever he goes to places where everyone else has pulled out, even places where their own governments have abandoned them, he says, you always find Christians.

Christians are always there. Christians are always found in places of greatest suffering, greatest decay, greatest darkness all around the world. They're always found being there as salt and light in their community.

And you ask, well, why? Why would Christians do this? Why would Christians endure the cost that comes with being different in our culture?

Why would Christians face the certainty of persecution for their beliefs or their way of life? Why would Christians intentionally seek out places of darkness or suffering or decay?

Why would they risk their livelihoods or, in some cases, their lives? Why would they risk their lives? Why would they risk their lives? And the answer is that all of this is nothing compared to what Jesus Christ has done for us.

[25 : 53] It's nothing compared to that. The true light of the world, as he said himself, is Jesus Christ. And while we may at times risk our reputation, he gave his life.

While we can only preserve society against decay, he offers the hope of resurrection. While we can only promote growth, Jesus brings complete renewal to the world.

While we can merely be a city on a hill, Jesus will one day illuminate the whole earth. He will banish all darkness such that the sun itself will no longer be necessary.

So our ministry in the world as salt and light is only possible because of Jesus' ministry. So the core of being salt and light is realizing that all of this is not actually about us.

It's about him, Jesus Christ, and his glory. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you. And we know that this is not even something that we aspire to be.

[27 : 11] You don't say you should be salt or light. You say you are salt and light. That if we belong to you, Lord, if we understand what you've done for us, the truth of the gospel, then we emanate that which is salt and light through our community because we're changed by your love.

And I pray just that. I pray that you would, through your love and the truth of the gospel, melt our hearts, that we would fall more deeply in love with you. And that because of that love, Lord, we would become the salt and light that you desire us to be and glorify you.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen.