

What The World Needs Now

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 March 1995

Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] I think it was the Indian philosopher, Dr. S. Radhad Krishnan, who observed that Christians are ordinary people making extraordinary claims.

I like that. Christians are ordinary people making extraordinary claims. In particular, Christians are ordinary people making extraordinary claims about Jesus of Nazareth.

We do it every time we worship. Jesus, the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease, his music in the sinner's ears, his life and health and peace.

We do it every time we worship. We worship the Apostles' Creed. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the very, suffered under precious Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. The third day he rose from the grave, he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father.

From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. Christians are ordinary people making truly extraordinary claims about the carpenter from Galilee.

[1 : 05] But I think we can turn Dr. Krishnan's words around and also say, Christians are ordinary people about whom Jesus of Nazareth makes extraordinary claims.

Christians are ordinary people about whom the Spirit-conceived, virgin-born, crucified, risen, reigning, and coming Lord makes extraordinary claims.

It is in that spirit, then, that I invite you to approach the text from the Sermon on the Mount before us today. Our text is Matthew 5, 13 through 16.

In these very familiar words, Jesus makes truly extraordinary claims about ordinary people. Now, in order to fully appreciate the impact of them, we need to begin at Matthew 5, 3, so that we hear them in context.

And I've asked Lynn Johnson if she would come and read the text for us. If you are able, will you stand for the reading of the gospel? Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[2 : 16] Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of me.

Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again?

It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

[3 : 27] Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Please be seated. Spirit of the living God, we believe that you inspired Matthew the tax collector to write down these words many years ago.

And now we pray in your mercy and grace that you would take these words off the page and cause them to come alive in our lives as never before. For we pray this in Jesus' name and for the good of this city.

Amen. Try to put yourself in the place of those people who first heard Jesus make these extraordinary claims. Ordinary folk.

None of them listed in who's who in Palestine. None of them occupying any important offices in the Roman Empire. None of them occupying any important places in the religious system of Israel.

Ordinary people. A rather ragged bunch at that. Or motley bunch. I couldn't get out which word I wanted. Yet something was happening to them.

[4 : 41] They were being changed. Slowly but surely, they were being changed. Jesus had been declaring his gospel to them. His good news. The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near.

And up along that mountainside, Jesus began to spell out the implications of his good news. He was describing what happens in the lives of people who embrace this good news.

He was beginning to describe the character traits that emerge in people in whom the kingdom of God is coming near. And even as he spoke, they were experiencing something. Something was happening to them.

They were being changed. They were being gospelized. Then Jesus made that hugely extraordinary claim about those ordinary people. Looking out at that ragged group of people, he said, You.

You whom I am calling to myself, you are the salt of the earth. You whom I love. You upon whom my reign of grace is coming.

[5 : 41] You are the light of the world. What? The Romans had a saying at that time, and it goes like this. There is nothing more useful than sun and salt.

There is nothing more useful than sun and salt. Sole et sole. There is nothing more useful than you. There is nothing more useful than you. There is nothing more useful than the citizens of the inbreaking kingdom of God. You are sole et sole. You are the salt of the earth.

You are the sun. You are the light of the world, literally, of the cosmos. Amazing. Amazing. How is that for dignity? How is that for self-esteem?

How is that for meaning and purpose? Jesus was bestowing on those people cosmic significance. The disciples of Jesus Christ, ordinary people, broken people, touched by his extraordinary grace and truth, are as necessary to the world as sun and salt.

[6 : 51] Jesus is saying that the world can get along without a lot of things, but one thing it cannot get along without is the gospelized. Every Palestinian home, however rich or poor, used both salt and light.

John Stott suggests that during his own boyhood, Jesus must have often watched his mother use salt in the kitchen and light the lamps in the evening. Salt and light are indispensable household commodities.

What a claim. You. You are the salt, not only of your family, but of the earth. You. You are the light, not only of your home.

You are the light of the cosmos. Now, in using these two metaphors of salt and light, I think that Jesus is revealing to us his understanding.

His perspective on what is going on in the world. Specifically, Jesus uses the two metaphors of salt and light to reveal his understanding of the condition of the world left to itself, the role that the gospelized humanity is to play in the world, and the way in which gospelized humanity is to play that role.

[8 : 10] Three things. The condition of the world left to itself, the role of the gospelized in the world, and the way in which they are to play that role. Consider each of these perspectives one at a time.

First, Jesus' use of the salt and light metaphors reveals his assessment of the condition of the world left to itself. Left to itself.

Left to itself. Which is, of course, what world wants. That's what world means. Left to itself.

Human society organizing itself without God. Through these metaphors, Jesus reveals his understanding of what happens to the world that wants to be left to itself.

Most of us in this room mainly use salt to enhance the taste of food. A little pinch of salt gives zest to otherwise ordinary food.

[9 : 09] But in the first century, and in the centuries up until the advent of refrigeration, salt was used to preserve food. Salt was, and still is in many parts of the world, absolutely essential to keep food, particularly meat, from spoiling.

What does Jesus claim, you are the salt of the earth, imply about his perspective on the world? Human existence, left to itself, has a tendency to spoil. Human existence, left to itself, has a tendency to rot. Left to itself, society decays. It deteriorates. Not very flattering, is it? Actually, it's rather offensive, isn't it? But that is the creator and recreator's perspective on the world left to itself.

Thirty or forty years ago, people would have laughed at Jesus. We were riding the crest of that wave called progress. I can still remember seeing Ronald Reagan come on the television and say, At GE, our most important product is progress.

[10 : 23] Philosophers, politicians, scientists, sociologists, theologians, spoke in grand and glorious terms of the ascent of man. In fact, there's a magazine that came to be at that time called The Christian Century.

We were riding the crest. We were convinced that we were marching triumphantly to the placing of paradise on earth by humanity. Very few people speak that way anymore.

Yes, we have made tremendous progress in technology and medicine, for which I am very grateful. Living conditions have greatly improved, at least in North America.

Things go faster. Things are bigger. Things are stronger. Things are more colorful. But what has happened to the environment along the way? And more importantly, what has happened to the human soul along the way?

Where have we gone morally, relationally, spiritually? Left to itself, the world tends to run down. Like meat, it needs something from the outside to slow and halt that downward slide.

[11 : 36] The key phrase in what I've been saying is the phrase left to itself. The propensity to decay is the consequence of the basic problem of humanity, the decision to go it alone, the decision to build a world apart from the living God.

When we left the living God out of the equation, everything began to unravel, it began to disintegrate, and now, left to itself, the system cannot stop itself from sliding into rottenness.

Sobering. The earth, the cosmos, like meat, needs some sort of salt to check its inherent tendency to decay.

We learn more from Jesus' claim, you are the light of the world. In using that metaphor, Jesus is saying that the world, left to itself, tends to go dark.

Human societies easily lose their way. When are we going to learn that? We read the history of civilization, and it's there in front of us over and over again.

[12 : 44] We have a tendency to take wrong turns, leading to even deeper darkness. We fail to spot the potholes and the stumps in the road. Our thinking gets muddled. Wrong is right as long as it feels good.

And right becomes old-fashioned. We become very vulnerable to the latest fad. And the slightest flicker of hope will cause us to run to it with all of our strength.

And interestingly enough, we call those periods of history, when God is omitted from the center of things, the enlightenment. Isn't that the ultimate darkness?

That the period of history, when in our intelligence, we conclude there is no God and He is irrelevant, we call it enlightenment. Left to itself, the world cannot stop itself from going dark.

Now, here's the good news. The good news is, God has not left the world to itself. The Lord of the universe provides salt.

[13 : 54] The Lord of the universe brings light into all of that. And to our surprise, the salt and the light are broken human beings whom Jesus has called into discipleship.

Which leads us then to the second perspective Jesus reveals in using these domestic metaphors. These metaphors reveal the role that the gospelized play in a decaying, darkening world.

Jesus Christ has placed His disciples on the earth, in the world, for a double function. As salt to arrest, or at least halt, social decay.

And as light to dispel the prevailing darkness. I'll say that again. We have a double function in the world. As salt to arrest, social decay. And as light to dispel the prevailing darkness.

Arrest and dispel. Arrest and dispel. Arrest and dispel. As fishermen rub salt into the fish that they catch to preserve them, so the Savior of the world rubs His disciples into the fabric of society to preserve it.

[15 : 02] As a candle or a flashlight reveals the obstacles in the road and illumines the way we are to walk, so the Savior of the world places His disciples in every sector of life to reveal the stumbling blocks and to open up the way home.

Which is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commenting on this text, says, In casting out the disciples, the earth is destroying its very life. In casting out the disciples of Jesus, the earth is destroying its very life.

The disciples of the incarnate God are an antiseptic to social decay and a lighthouse to seekers. Which suggests to me, then, that the welfare of any city is directly related to the health of its congregations.

Let's press these two metaphors a little bit more. What do they tell us about what it means to be disciples in this world? Each metaphor suggests at least three concrete functions.

Salt has three. Light has three. Salt. Salt preserves, enhances flavor, and quickens thirst. Preserves, enhances flavor, and quickens thirst.

[16 : 21] Jesus is saying that the gospelized play that role in the sectors of life where He has placed them. Preserves. We are there to keep our sector from rotting.

Our mere presence is to somehow prevent the slide towards social decay. As one commentator put it, we are to be moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent.

Preserve. Enhances flavor. We are to give zest to the sphere of life where He has placed us. Something about the way we act, something about the way we speak, is to bring a freshness into that sector.

Someone has said that most people live quiet lives of quiet desperation. We are to be the salt of hope, the salt of joy, the salt of peace. When I say that, I think about the role that I have played or not played in my extended family over the years that I've been a pastor.

I think of what Oliver Wendell Holmes once said. He wrote, I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.

[17 : 37] Pardon the offense to any undertaker here today. The gospelized enhance the flavor of life and create thirst.

Salty food makes us thirsty. Salty disciples make people thirsty. We are to so live in our spheres of the community that people want what we have been given.

Why do you have this peace? Why are you able to stand firm? Why is it that the sorrow you are going through has not quenched your joy? Are others thirsty for the living God because of you and me in our spheres?

And light. Light has three functions. Light illumines, guides, and pushes back the darkness. Light illumines, guides, and pushes back the darkness.

The gospelized are to play that role in the community. Illumine. Our mere presence is to serve as a candle in a dark room. Sometimes we'll be welcomed. Sometimes we won't.

[18 : 42] It depends upon what the room wants to do with what's been illumined. Either way, the gospelized are to serve the same role that the gospelizer himself does. Illuminating by our very presence dishonest practices in business.

Gossip in the secretarial pool. Loose talk and still loose morals at parties. Corruption in politics. Racial prejudice. Greed. Selfishness. And positively, we are to illumine the presence of the living God in the midst of it all.

The presence of God's acts of mercy and judgment. The presence of this hand that welcomes people back home. Guide. Light also guides.

We have been placed in our sector of the community to help guide that sector into the truth. We are to be models of a new way of life. Something about the way we work.

Something about the way we treat other people. Something about the way we speak is to lead people out of darkness and into God's marvelous light. And push back.

[19 : 46] Light pushes back the darkness. This is one of the most crucial roles that the church has played throughout the years. To push back the lies that keep people in bondage. And to push back the illusions which keep people in despair and hopelessness.

To break the spell of the darkness by announcing the good news that light has come in the kingdom. I like the poster that says, It does little good to curse the darkness.

One ought to light a candle. The candle melts away the fear and begins to melt hardened hearts. Is the darkness receding in your sector and in mine because of our presence.

Hugely extraordinary claims about ordinary people. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Thankfully, a little pinch of salt goes a long way.

And thankfully, the slightest little match can bring light into a big room. A few years ago, a crisis was brewing in the family of the leader of one of the most powerful Islamic nations on earth.

[20 : 55] It seems that some members of this Islamic family were beginning to express serious interest in the Christian faith. The secret police were called in and they were put on the case to find out the problem.

And it turns out that a few years before, the king's advisors had hired Filipino maids to come and watch for the king's children. Well, the Filipino maids did what came naturally to them.

They read stories about Jesus to the children at night before they went to bed. And as these children grew, they were more interested in more stories about Jesus.

Who knows where that crisis is going to take that nation? You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of nations. I think you can see then that many of us are asking the wrong question.

Many of us are asking the wrong question about what is happening in places like Los Angeles.

When society around us begins to disintegrate, we ask, what's gone wrong with the world?

[22 : 06] And then we point an accusing finger at society. But ought not the question be, what's gone wrong with the church? Where is the church?

Ought not the finger be pointed at the church? At us. When meat goes bad, do you blame the meat? No, you ask, where was the salt?

When a room goes dark, do you blame the room? No, you ask, where was the light? Dr. Keith Phillips is founder and president of World Impact.

World Impact is one of the most effective ministries I know of. It's a holistic ministry among the forgotten people of America's inner cities. Some of the staff of World Impact worship with us. In his book, *They Dared to Love the Ghetto*, Dr. Keith Phillips asks, why are the inner cities of America deteriorating so rapidly?

Why do we have armed guards on the inner city schools? Why are there bars over the windows in so many private residences? Why are the elderly afraid to walk to the store or to the mailbox?

[23 : 19] The answer, the easy answer, is to blame the violence, loneliness, and hurt of the ghetto on sin. This answer is correct, but only partially correct. There is a more complete, convicting, and condemning answer, and it involves the church of Jesus Christ.

The evangelical church has run from the inner city. In fact, it has galloped. When the church abandons the inner city, what do we expect to happen to it?

It's lost its salt. It's lost its light. You are the salt. You are the light. See? The inner cities of the world, of course, are not the only ghettos, not the only sectors of life that have been abandoned by the church.

What about the entertainment industry? What about the media? What about politics? What about higher education? I thank God for those of you who are engaged in those spheres, but you would agree with me that we need more, right?

We need more. Listen to the word of the Lord to us in this place. You are the salt of the entertainment capital of the world. If the entertainment capital of the world goes rotten, where was the salt?

[24 : 35] See? You are the light of the city of angels. If the city of angels goes dark, where was the light? Which brings us then to the third perspective Jesus reveals to us by use of these domestic metaphors.

Through these metaphors, he shows us the way in which the gospelized now function in our role. And I think I see in here three clues of how we fulfill our role.

The first, the metaphors of salt and light help us avoid two extremes. On the one extreme, the gospelized are to resist the temptation to turn inward and become solely preoccupied with their own spiritual well-being.

Jesus says, a city set on a hill cannot be hidden. People don't light a light and put a bushel over it. Jesus, I think, would also say, salt is of little use in the salt shaker. It must be shaken out onto the plate and into the meat.

It has to get into the meat. And it can only get into the meat by dissolving. Indeed, it must dissolve if flavor is to be released. Someone has said, the church is the only institution that does not exist for its own sake.

[26 : 03] The church is the only institution that does not exist for its own sake. In order to be what Christ wants the church to be in the world, the church must constantly dissolve into the world.

We do not exist on this corner for us alone. The worship service is not for us alone. That's one temptation we have to resist.

The other, we must resist the other extreme of accommodating ourselves to the values and agenda of the world. In our desire to get a hearing with our contemporaries, we're tempted to water down the message, right?

We're tempted to blunt the sharp edge of grace. Salt gives flavor to the meat and prevents the decay because it is different than the meat. Jesus says, if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?

It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by people. How many churches are ignored by the city because the city sees nothing different in them?

[27 : 12] All it sees in the church is a mirror image of itself. The city looks in and says, whoa, those people treat each other just like we do. When they disagree, they speak just as harshly, just as critically as we do.

It looks in the city and doesn't see anything different. Martin Lloyd-Jones put it this way, the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, it invariably attracts the world.

So, we are to avoid two extremes. On the one hand, becoming a holy huddle and on the other hand, becoming an inoffensive culture pleaser.

That's not easy to do. Dr. Richard Mao, who was president of Fuller Seminary a couple years ago, wrote a book, the title of which I think keeps us on track. The title was Holiness.

Isn't that good? Holy worldliness. Jesus says, you are in the world, but not of it. After last week's sermon on peacemakers, Dave Saul came to me and he pointed out that the 18th century statesman Burke had a unique way of describing the role of the gospelized.

[28 : 31] Burke used this image of little platoons. Little platoons deployed in the world. Kind of advanced representations of the invading kingdom of God.

Doing works of mercy and checking injustice. That's the first clue. The second clue of how we fulfill our role is that we do so simply by being who we are in Jesus.

Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out that Jesus does not say you have salt or you have light, nor does Jesus say you should be salt or you should be light.

Jesus says you are salt and you are light. Why? Well, how did we become what Jesus says we are? By virtue of contact with him.

By virtue of his claim upon our lives. By virtue of his kingdom invading our lives. We are slowly but surely becoming like him. We are slowly but surely taking on his character traits. So one commentator argues the character of the influence exerted by the citizens of the kingdom is the influence of character.

[29 : 42] The character of our influence is the influence of character. And what character traits serve as salt and light? The traits Jesus has been describing in the Beatitudes.

It is Beatitude people who turn out to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Imagine that. It's the poor in spirit. Those who know they have not arrived.

Those who know they are powerless. Who begin to bring flavor and brightness to the world.

Imagine. It's those who mourn over human brokenness. It's those who are meek.

It's those who hunger and thirst for right relatedness. Who check social decay and open a window for God's reality. It's those character traits which the living one works in us that arrest, decay, and dispel the darkness.

Which brings us then to the third clue of how we fulfill our role. We must remain close to Jesus Christ. We must remain close to him. Which is why we sang those songs of love earlier in the service.

[30 : 49] We must remain close to him. He is the salt. He is the light. We are salty only because he has shook his salt on us. We shine only because he's chosen to shine his light on us.

We're like the moon. The moon has no inherent luminosity. It shines only because the sun shines on it. We have no inherent luminosity. We shine to the degree that Jesus shines on us.

A little girl went to a beautiful cathedral with her mother. And as she watched the sunshine pouring through the stained glass windows, she said, Mommy, who are those people in the stained glass window?

And her mother said, Well, those are the saints. And the little girl said, Oh, now I know what saints are. Saints are people who let the light shine through them. For the sake of the city, for the sake of society, which by itself will rot and get dark, you and I must stay close to him who is the true salt and him who is the true light.

Christians are ordinary people making extraordinary claims about Jesus Christ. And Christians are ordinary people about whom Jesus Christ makes extraordinary claims.

[32 : 15] You, my beloved, are the salt of the city. You are the light of the cosmos. And what the world needs now is for you to be you.

Another person upon whom the Spirit of God has come to sing new songs is Graham Kendrick. He's the author of Shine, Jesus, Shine. Let's make that our prayer as we sing together.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.