

Moulding Culture

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[0 : 00] Gracious Father, we want to thank you for your word. We want to thank you for what it reveals about you and your purposes, the view that you have of this world and your intention for it.

I pray that as we've been learning through this series, that you might shape us, continue to shape us, in order that we might shape your world. And particularly tonight, as we think about the cultures, the place that you put us in, how we might work for your purposes in that place so that people might flourish.

And we ask it for your glory. Amen. I've been a regular patient of a local physiotherapist over the past couple of years. Feet problems, shoulder problems, all sorts of stuff like that.

And I discovered late last year that he was, in fact, a Christian. He was telling me very recently that he'd hit a bit of a crossroad in his life and particularly in his vocation, wondering if he was doing what God intended for him to do, what God wanted him to do with his life.

He knew of plenty of Christian physiotherapists who were working in third world countries, working amongst great need in those places. And here he was, a physio in Chatswood.

[1 : 21] And, you know, should he be a missionary physio? That was kind of his question with his life. Does that, you know, be more purposeful for God? Is that really what God wants to do for his life?

And so for him, it was a question of purpose. What does God intend for him? Was he pursuing God's purpose in his life where he was in Chatswood as a physio? He felt that his job had less purpose than those in third world countries.

And what compounded it for him was that he hadn't had much, if any, opportunity to speak about Jesus in his workplace. There was no workplace Bible study group.

There was no workplace prayer group. And what's more, when he'd been working on people, broken people, he hadn't shared about Jesus, the great healer of all people. And that is, he didn't see that he had any opportunity to shine for Jesus where he was in that place.

Or that he was working out God's purposes at all in God's world in that place. And so it was a great opportunity for me just to very briefly, having my mind in the Frontline series, just to connect with him and encourage him about his Frontline.

[2 : 36] I said to him a number of things. Number one, I said to him that he worked as the only Christian in an organization of 60 people. Don't tell me that God hasn't placed you there for some good purpose, even if you can't see it at the moment.

That's the first thing. Secondly, that I thought he did his work really well. He'd fixed my plantar fasciitis. He fixed one frozen shoulder and he's working on another frozen shoulder.

And I'm kind of hoping it's going to end there because it is sort of expensive after a bit of time. But he did his work well. And in fact, so well that I'd recommended at least four other people specifically to go and see him to help them in their particular issues as well.

Thirdly, one of those people who had actually went and saw him came back to me and said how much they thought this guy's character stood out. There was something different about him.

And they asked me, do you think he's Christian? I said, I don't know. But there was something about him that stood out. And I said, I think fourthly, the work that he was doing all day to fix broken bodies, I think that somehow connects with God's purposes to redeem and to restore his world.

[3 : 53] Just as a rough guess. Towards the end of that chat, very quickly, just a few minutes, tears started to well up in his eyes because of the sense of purpose that he had in that moment, just very quickly, that what he was doing actually mattered to God.

He was deeply thankful. I didn't get a discount, but he was deeply thankful. My hope is that as we've been going through this series, that likewise, it's an encouragement for you into where the place that God has put you.

Encouragement to see how God might be using you to work, to redeem, and restore his world through what might be, quite simply, your ordinary life. The ordinary things that you do in life.

And so far in this series, we've looked at the Christian worldview of both the dignity and the difficulty of work. We looked at how we might impact God's world and pursue his purposes through modelling godly character, through working well, working with all our might, as if working for the Lord and not for other people, and ministering grace and love.

And today we're looking at the issue of how we might mould culture on our front lines. How we might mould culture. Now, culture is one of those big words that rolls off our tongues, but very rarely do we know what it actually means.

[5 : 21] What does culture mean? Culture exists everywhere. Most of the time, culture is hidden. It's an assumed thing rather than a stated thing. So if you said, what's the culture of your workplace?

Don't we got one, but I'm not exactly sure necessarily what it is. Culture, and this is a very simplistic view of understanding culture, culture is quite simply how we do things around here.

So every family unit has a culture. Every gathering of people has a culture. Every church has a culture. Every workplace has a culture. Every school and university has a culture.

And you can be right next door to one another but have very different cultures. Every team has a culture. Culture is the way that people interact. It's the food that they eat, the way that they speak to one another, the way that in a church they would pray, the clothes that you would wear, the way that you would handle conflict, the way you spend money, the way the decisions are made, the way that leadership is respected or disrespected or the group is led, and a multitude of other things form a culture within a group.

Or to put it another way, this might be another way to think about it, what would an outsider need to know to learn to understand about this particular group and how it functions in order for them to fit within the group and to work within the group?

[6 : 53] What would they need to know? That's culture. And culture is everywhere. As I said, in every organization. There was an article in the Sydney Morning Herald yesterday about Thermomix.

And if you don't know what a Thermomix is, then you are out of touch with the culture of North Shore of Sydney and particularly the housewife culture of North Shore in Sydney.

Secondly, to answer the question, what is a Thermomix? A Thermomix is a kitchen appliance that does everything. It not only dices, ways, mixes and cooks, it orders the ingredients, it will get them delivered to your home, and it will stack them into your pantry.

It will run your bath and give you a massage. And apparently, it also gives you second degree burns if you're not careful, which was the issue in the article of the Sydney Morning Herald.

Danica Jones complained online that she had a faulty Thermomix that went crazy, did whatever it did and caused her second...

[7 : 56] I don't think it has a mind of its own. Something went faulty with it and it just went nuts and burnt her with second degree burns. So she complained online and what she got, she received from Thermomix owners was incessant bullying about Thermomix being the greatest thing since sliced bread.

And she got bullying on social media and she got intimidation from Thermomix staff. And so the lawyer defending the woman said that the culture of the company was horrific.

There we go. That's a... In other words, what the lawyer is saying there is that within that organisation, the way you handle complaints or criticism is to go on the attack. That's a cultural thing.

That is, culture is the way we do things around here. And some of us experience in workplace, in social clubs, in retail outlets, families, family cultures where manipulation is the way you get people to do things.

That's all culture. And often we are, many of us confront unhealthy cultural groups, whatever we're part of. So how might we, as Christian people, contribute to cultural change on our front lines so that they become places where people flourish, pursuing God's purposes for the good order of society?

[9 : 29] That's what Jesus calls his disciples to in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. It's the famous Sermon on the Mount. And Jesus calls his disciples first of all to himself and then he shares with them what the characteristics are of those who live according to the kingdom.

So get your Bibles and turn to Matthew chapter 5. I'm going to focus primarily on 11 to 16. The Beatitudes describe the sensual character of Christians.

Blessed is he, his poor and spirit. Blessed is he, seek after, you know, blah, blah, blah, that sort of stuff. All the way down there in the early bits of Matthew chapter 5. And what it's saying there is that Christians are people who've got a radically new relationship with God through trust in the work, the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross to deal with our sin, to deal with death and give us eternal life.

That's what the Beatitudes about. This radical new relationship with God. And then, in verses 13 to 16, the focus shifts from the Christian's relationship with God to the Christian's relationship with the world.

And so, if we have the relationship with God that the first section speaks about, then you will have the relationship with the world that the second bit speaks about.

[11 : 02] What Jesus is saying here is that if you are at all living a consistent Christian life, then in this world, you will be salt and you will be light.

Verse 13 and 14, both start emphatically with you. It is like Jesus saying, you, that is speaking to his disciples, you and only you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

And therefore, you simply must not fail what you have been called to do. and who you've been called to serve. You must be who you are.

You must not lose your saltiness. You must not be contaminated or compromised. You are light. And so, you must let your light shine. And it must not be concealed by sin or compromise or laziness or fear.

In other words, this is your Christian vocation. This is your calling in the world.

[12 : 16] So let's start with salt. Verse 13, you are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

In ancient times, salt was used as a preservative to stop food from rotting. It was used as a seasoning to enhance its flavor and it was also used as a fertilizer to enable fruitfulness.

It was, however, most valuable as a preservative. This is before refrigerators were made. And you would rub in salt into whatever would normally decay.

And that salt rubbed into it, penetrating it, would stem the decay and stem its breakdown. The function of salt here is largely negative.

It prevents decay. It's about stopping the spread of evil. It's an intriguing image that Jesus uses, I think.

[13 : 26] For most of us, if you see someone's life falling apart, we tend to move away from it. When you see brokenness, we tend to move away.

We're always cautious about being sucked in and being connected too deep and having too much expected of us. And Jesus says, if you're a Christian, you go in.

You penetrate is what you do. You go in rather than pull away. You go in to stem the decay because you're salt.

And this is also true if you see a society or a city or a neighborhood or a workplace or a family falling apart with social problems.

Christians don't run away. They find ways of being there to help and to shape for good. Because Christians have experienced in their own lives, Colossians 1.17, in Christ, all things hold together.

[14 : 29] We know what it is to have life falling apart and Jesus to come in and to bring it together. The Christian goes in because they want to be of help, simply responding and being for other people what Christ has been for them.

It's a wonderfully rich metaphor. To be salt is to be involved. Salt penetrates. Salt stops decay unless it loses its saltiness.

Now, sodium chloride is a very, very strong compound that doesn't often break down.

That is, you can't normally blow apart sodium chloride. Salt doesn't lose its saltiness as such. But it will lose its purity. It will lose its purity.

Salt can be contaminated and once it's contaminated, you cannot purify it. And the contamination here that Jesus has in mind is the idea where we are not distinct from the world.

[15 : 50] salt. And so, that's the connection with the second part in us being light. Now, traditionally, Christians are more known for being salt than being light.

That is, we are seen by our wider society as being fundamentally negative rather than positive. negative. That is, we are more known for what we're against than what we are for.

That is, that's why I say we are more known for being negative, more known for being salt. We are more known for being against things than for things. And so, this is really important for us because Jesus' disciples exert a double influence on the secular world.

A negative influence of arresting decay and a positive influence of bringing light into darkness. You see, it's one thing to stop the spread of evil.

It's another to promote the spread of truth and hope and goodness. Verse 14, you are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.

[16 : 58] Instead, they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men so that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

So, the light metaphor here is a bit different. As I said, it's positive as opposed to negative. When Jesus talks about salt, he's saying something significant about human society that is that human society left by itself will decay.

It will go rotten. And when he says something about Christians of light, he's saying something significant also about human society.

It's dark. In the Bible, light symbolizes truth because light exposes falsehood.

But it also symbolizes hope and even joy because light is brilliant and beautiful. And so, when this passage says that Christians are the light of the world, what it means is that we bring hope and joy through truth into darkness.

[18 : 14] as the positive influence that we have on society. How and how much our society needs it. A society that we exist that is a society that says that we don't need God, that he has no place amongst us at all.

We are secular. We are godless. For example, Somerset Maugham was a British playwright and a novelist and a short story writer. He was among the most popular writers of his era and, reputedly, the highest paid author in the 1930s.

That's a long time ago. And like many people, he thought that the existence of God and survival beyond death of any sort at all was doubtful.

He wasn't an atheist. But he thought about the consequences of his belief system more than most atheists. He understood the consequences of it.

And he wrote this in his autobiography. He said, If death ends all and I neither have to hope for God after death nor to fear evil after death, then I must ask myself, what am I here for?

[19 : 34] And how in these circumstances I must conduct myself? And the answer is plain but so unpalatable that most will not face it.

And here's his answer. There is no meaning for life and therefore life has no meaning. That's his conclusion to his belief system.

And what he's saying is not that he would put it in these words is that society today will tell you that there is probably no God that there's no reason really for why you're here that there is no right or wrong and that after you die there is nothingness.

That is after you die there is darkness. And so if Somerset was here right now he would say if darkness is beyond death if that's all that exists then then that means that darkness is now.

That's society. It's dark. And so what's the answer of our society to that philosophical position? Go and enjoy life. Really?

[20 : 55] Have a good time? Really? Really? See what he was saying without realizing is that without the light of salvation this world is dark and we don't want to admit the world is dark but he was right.

Christians are light because of the good news of the Lord Jesus gives us light. A light that we do not have. The good news of the Christian faith tells us that every single one of our deepest desires in our hearts will be met by Jesus in the end.

It tells us the good news tells us that because we are saved by his grace and his mercy we are always his. It tells us that there is no condemnation for those who trust Jesus.

It tells us that we might have good days and bad days and good years and bad years but you are guaranteed to be part of his glorious bright future.

And Christians because of that live in the light of that future now. And friends when you look out there and you see this metaphor that we are the light of the world and you see the darkness of our secular society and wonder and Christians are being pushed back pushed back pushed back pushed back and you wonder what on earth can we possibly do?

[22 : 30] Let me give you one encouragement. It does not take much light to push back darkness. This half a watt bulb in the darkness of my daughter's room is enough to give me perspective in her room it's enough for me to be able to walk around in her room and not tread on the cat or toys or whatever it is and it's enough to push back fear for her.

Half a watt because darkness cannot resist light. Darkness cannot push light back.

That's the job of light pushes darkness back and it does not take much to push back. And so friends even if we are a minority even if we do not have a voice light pushes back darkness.

But that's not all Jesus is saying here. He isn't just saying that you have the truth and so therefore your job in society is to preach the truth and give people this hope.

because he's saying something a little bit different. It looks like Jesus is actually mixing his metaphors in these verses. He talks about light and then he talks about light at the end and then he talks about a city in the middle and so it looks like he's mixing his metaphors and if you know anything about English or you probably heard your English teacher tell you at some point that you should not mix your metaphors but the good thing is Jesus didn't speak English and so this is okay.

[24 : 12] Right in the middle it says here a city on a hill cannot be hidden. I think it's exactly the same idea. Light, light, light all the way through.

Most cities were not built on hills. Most cities were put in the bases of the hills or in the bottom of the valleys where there was a water source and where the trade routes and the roads were. But if you put a city on a hill just with candles and lamps it would be enough from the light from that city would illuminate a great distance.

You could see the city from a great distance. And he's saying that Christians and the church he's saying here you need to be a counter culture. You need to be a light in the darkness.

You need to be visible. People need to see that you are different. see Christians are to be light of the world not just by what they say but how they live their lives.

The words good deeds is right in there. People might see your good deeds. And so being light in the world I think what this picture is we are an alternative Chatswood in Chatswood.

[25 : 31] We are a city within a city. And how this city within a city lives and how it works out its life is what the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is about.

The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is radically different than the views of the rest of the Chatswood when it comes to things like money and sex and relationships and power and a bunch of other things.

The views, the culture is different. You see, it's not just good enough, I don't think, just to hold up the truth, to preach it, or to go onto Facebook and just have fights with atheists.

If Christians are not seen to be living differently than the rest of Chatswood, we have no impact. impact. If they don't see the difference, then we are not light.

Then we are not a city on a hill. God intends for his people to be rubbed into society, to penetrate for good in this world.

[26 : 41] Christian salt and light has therefore no business remaining snugly in a elegant, newly renovated, ecclesiastical salt and light cellar.

I'll say it again, it's not my main point, but I'll say it again in case you wonder what I'm talking about there. Christian salt and light has no business remaining snugly in an elegant, newly renovated, ecclesiastical salt and light cellar.

That is, our job is to be rubbed into secular society, into a secular community. Our business is to shine light and bring hope and joy and truth to this world, to shape for good the cultures of families and organisations and whatever it is, people groups that have a tendency to use people and manipulate people where there might be a tendency to waste resources or a tendency where there's fearful for change or a tendency to have ruthlessness in leadership and to treat people.

We want to have an influence for good in there, to shape the culture of those places, to speak up and to demonstrate good.

And so if you're a Christian, if you are at all living out the Christian life, a consistent Christian life, you are salt and you are light.

[28 : 07] You may feel like a half a watt bowl, but you are light. And because you are salt and because you are light and you are working to shape the way things should be done for the good of others and for the glory of God, you are not just salt and light, but you are also going to be hurt.

You're going to be hurt. This life that we've received in Jesus is lived out in the midst of a culture that has decided it wants to live, in a different way, largely without reference to God.

We live in a post-Christian secular society where Christianity has got no social credibility. Christianity has got no social credibility.

And so the verses right before, verses 13 and 16, are very important for us to grapple with in terms of what our expectations might be as salt and light.

And I think this is particularly pertinent for us right now. Matthew 5, verses 11 to 12, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

[29 : 27] So there are five things. This is a pretty sobering passage. If you're going to be salt and light, you're going to be hurt. And there are five things that I want to just say very quickly about those two verses that will help us with our expectations of what things might be like from Monday to Saturday.

Firstly, this is a beatitude. Blessed are you when people insult you. Not if people insult you, but when people insult you.

Every beatitude is a characteristic of the Christian. So help understand this. Every Christian must be poor in spirit.

That's one of the beatitudes. Every Christian must hunger and thirst after righteousness. Or you're not a Christian. Verse 11 is the last of the beatitudes.

Jesus is assuming that if you are a Christian, you will be persecuted. Or, put it more strongly, a Christian must be persecuted.

[30 : 38] If you are living in any way consistent with Christianity, you will be persecuted. That's the first thing. Secondly, let me just nuance that just a little bit. Just a little bit.

Notice it says, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. It's not because of you.

That's the nuance in the persecution. In other words, if you're talking about the Christian faith in a tackless way, an abrasive way, an insensitive way, a loveless way, a culturally inappropriate way, and people are giving you flack because of that, then you are being persecuted for your sake, not for Christ's sake.

It doesn't say, blessed are you when people persecute you for being obnoxious. If you're being obnoxious, then the blessedness promise doesn't hold, doesn't carry here.

And so what you need to understand and think about that in this nuance is you need to put the beginning of the passage with the end of the passage together. The beginning says that you will be persecuted.

[31 : 56] The end says that some people will look at your life and praise your father in heaven. Two different responses. Some will hate your guts because of Jesus and some will be attracted to you because of your life and your testimony about Jesus.

If both of those things are happening for you, then you are in the zone. You're in the sweet spot.

If you speak the truth in an unloving way, there will be persecution for sure, but there will not be attraction.

If you love people, you will be attractive, but there will be no persecution for truth and no one might ever come to faith, to Jesus because of you.

If you're always being persecuted, but no one comes to faith, you're probably being persecuted because of character flaws. If you are never being persecuted, if you never get any pushback, if no one is ever hostile towards you for being a Christian, then you're probably being a coward with the truth.

[33 : 23] You're probably not speaking up. So the question is, point number two, are you living in the zone? Point number three, as a Christian, and I don't think we can ever escape this, that is, we can never escape the persecution.

It's not unique to a secular age. Christians are persecuted because, as Jesus says in verse 11, because of me. Jesus has been uniquely hated in history.

There are secular scholars who acknowledge that. There are secular scholars who acknowledge that there are New Testament scholars whose main goal in being a New Testament scholar is to discredit Jesus.

He has been uniquely hated. Why? Because if Jesus is right, then he is the Son of God, he is the Lord of the universe, he is the judge and savior of all humanity, and if he's correct on those things, then you lose control of your life.

He is king. You lose control of your life. We have no alternative but to surrender and give ourselves over to him, if he's correct.

[34 : 39] Jesus says in John 15, if the world hates him, it will hate those who follow him, because a servant is not greater than his master. And so if you're a Christian, that lot will fall on you.

Fourthly, if you find yourself insulted and persecuted and people saying all kinds of false things about you, don't whinge about it.

I don't think there's any room for self-pity here. It comes with the territory of being his representatives. He says here, in the same way, they persecuted the prophets before you.

It's nothing new. It ought to be expected. Fifthly, how do we handle the inevitable difficulty of moulding culture in a secular post-Christian culture?

How do we cope with that flack? How do we cope with, because it will cost you, it will cost you your reputation, it will cost you a bunch of things. How do we handle that?

[35 : 43] You handle it by looking to Jesus and what he has promised. In Philippians 2, we are told that Jesus made himself as someone with no reputation.

He had glory, he had honour, and he became rejected. He was shamed, he was humiliated. The cross was the way that you killed someone who you truly despised.

It was a dishonourable death, and he lost his reputation, and we are saved through his persecution, and his loss of reputation.

We are saved through Jesus' shame, so that we will not die in shame. Our names are written in heaven, we will live with honour and glory forever, because Jesus chose to reject those things.

I think it means, frankly, that we can take the shame of persecution, we can take people thinking that we're a bunch of losers and idiots, we can take it when you stick your head up too high, someone's going to want to punch it, we can take it so that we might have the ultimate honour.

[37 : 04] He took the ultimate shame so that we might have the ultimate honour. societies come and go, and some are very hostile to Christianity, but Christians are not powerless, I think that's the point here, it's a sobering message, it's a difficult message, but we are not powerless, even when we don't appear to have a voice.

We have Jesus Christ, we have his gospel, his ideals and his power, and Jesus is all the salt, all the light that this decaying and dark world needs.

And so friends, take courage, you are the salt of the earth if you are living a consistent Christian life. Take courage, you are the light of the world if you are living a consistent Christian life.

It is, I believe, a hopeful message, but a sobering message, but it ends with great joy. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.

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