



INTRODUCTION

Today, we associate Rome with the Catholic Church, but if you could go back in time and tell first-century Christians living in Rome that their city would one day be full of ornate crosses celebrating Jesus, they wouldn't believe you. They lived in an environment hostile to their faith. People around them considered them members of a strange cult. They faced intense persecution. The emperor Nero falsely accused them of setting the Great Roman Fire of 64 AD and punished them by crucifying them and feeding them to dogs. The apostles Peter and Paul were martyred during Nero's persecution.

Yet by the third century, Christianity had grown into the official religion of Rome. How did such a hated, powerless people become so influential?

WEEKLY READING

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said some surprising things that reveal what he thought about power and influence. He lists a number of qualities that he associates with being blessed: those who are poor in spirit, mourn, and are meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; those who are merciful and pure in heart; those who are peacemakers; those who are persecuted because of righteousness or are insulted because of their faith in him (**Matthew 5:3-10**).

None of what Jesus said made much sense to people living in first-century Rome. In their world, might made right. Women, children, the elderly, and the sick had no voice. Generosity wasn't a virtue. Human life had little value. Yet within a few centuries, the followers of Jesus turned the Roman Empire upside down.

WEEKLY READING (Continued)

Jesus used two word pictures that explain how his followers, living on the margins of Roman society, changed their world. His metaphors were a call to his followers to live world-changing lives. Though they had no standing in the culture in which they lived, their lives would be the last stand.

“You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13a). Salt is a preservative; it prevents food from rotting. Jesus was calling his followers to be the preservative of the entire earth. Though their world was falling down around them, first-century Christians lived out a kind of mercy, purity of heart, and righteousness that found worth in those that Roman society thought worthless. They demonstrated a powerful love that changed the way the world valued human life.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14). Jesus meant for his followers to light up the world, showing the way to God’s grace. He called them to live in such a way that the people around them would connect the dots between how Christians live and the God they serve. Before he left them, Jesus told his followers what he wanted them to do:

The little group of people Jesus spoke to during his Sermon on the Mount went out and within three hundred years, they changed the world. They didn’t settle for being Christian. They were salt. They were light.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you’re a Christian, talk about the people who influenced your faith by being salt and light in your life. What did you learn from their example? If you’re not a Christian, talk about followers of Jesus who left you with a good impression of Christianity. What was it about them you liked? How were they different from other Christians you’d met?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Continued)

2. Why is it so rare for Christians to be salt and light in the world? Why is it difficult to live as Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount?
3. Last week, Timmy talked about Jesus' command to his followers to love others. How does that command relate to being salt and light in the world?
4. Read **Matthew 5:3–12**. Is what Jesus describes realistic? In what practical ways could you live as he describes at home or at work?
5. Who is one person for whom you can be salt and light? What is one thing you can do this week to help that person connect the dots between how you live and the God you serve?

MOVING FORWARD

If you're a Christian, it's because someone was salt and light in your life. You've had providential relationships. When you look back on your life, those people were "towns on a hill," showing you the way to God's grace. Their persistence may have been a little irritating, but their love changed your life.

Be salt. Be light.

Salt always preserves. Light always shows the way.

CHANGING YOUR MIND

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16