

That was a scene from *The Chosen*. It is one of the best Christian media productions I've ever seen, and I'd encourage you to download the app and give it a look. It takes some creative license, that scene is not found in the Bible, but I believe it does a wonderful job expressing God's Word and highlighting Jesus' humanity. In that scene, Jesus has begun his ministry and is preparing to deliver a significant sermon. He is working with Matthew to sort it out (not sure if Jesus actually needed any prep time, but we'll go with it). In fact, he's been stressing a bit about it. And his anxiety about his sermon turned to my anxiety as I prepared to preach about that sermon! It is, as you know, the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus' and Matthew's exchange express the heart of what Jesus is about to proclaim.

The Sermon on the Mount is a manifesto about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is, as Jesus said in the clip, a revolutionary Kingdom because its values, way of life for its citizens, and the culture it creates under the King's rule is nothing like the world. It is wholly counter-cultural. Last week, we looked at the values and character of the Kingdom and the good life it leads to through what are known as the Beatitudes. But because it is so counter-cultural, Jesus ends that section by talking about the likelihood of us being persecuted for living it out. When the Kingdom of God collides with the Kingdom of Man, pushback is sure to come. When that pushback comes, we might respond by going along to get along or retreating to the shadows. That's not what Jesus wants his Kingdom citizens to do.

Over a decade ago, there was a series of years when I got a knock on the door every spring. The first year it happened, I opened the door to find a very distinctive individual standing there. Her appearance was what we might call granola or grunge. Heavy plaid flannel, piercings everywhere, and maybe a bit disheveled. As she talked, I quickly learned she was passionate about the environment and was asking me to sign a petition in favor of creating a law that would force electronics companies to take back their products and recycle them. She spoke with passion, a sense of urgency, and an earnest belief of the good this would do. We had a nice exchange and she moved on. The next year, I got a knock opened the door, and found myself face-to-face with a guy who looked almost exactly like the lady who came the year before. After a couple of sentences, I was reminded of her and knew they were of the same tribe. He had the same passion, devotion, and hope. The third year, when I opened the door and saw a different female who looked just like the other two, before she could even talk, I exclaimed "You're here to talk about recycling electronics" I startled her, threw her off her script, but we worked our way through it.

I never signed that petition, but I always had a profound respect for those people. They were committed to their cause, stood out from the crowd, risked getting doors slammed in their faces, and they had a sincere belief they could positively influence this world. After each encounter, my thought was "Man, I wish more Christians would live in this way." To be this distinct, this involved, and this eager to do good for the cause of the Kingdom. But because we may pay the price for living that way, many of us are tempted to compromise or withdraw. Jesus anticipates that temptation and addresses it next. In light of the possibility of persecution, how are we to participate in and influence this world?

[Matthew 5:13-16] ¹³“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus uses two images of salt and light to explain the witness and influence of Kingdom citizens on this earth. Our character and our conduct, molded by the Beatitudes, are to stand out from, and do good for, this world, resulting in the glory of God. Our presence is to be distinctive and noticeable.

Let’s start with salt. Salt was an essential and valuable commodity in the ancient world. Historians say it had eleven different uses. Some soldiers received salt as part of their compensation, which is where we get the phrase “He’s not worth his salt.” While there were many uses, Jesus was likely referring to two specific ones.

The first is salt as a seasoning. If you’ve ever cooked or ever eaten, you know how important salt is. Salt makes a difference because salt stands out. Salt is so essential because its flavor is so distinct from whatever you put it on, and it makes everything taste better. I’m convinced the only reason we eat chicken is because salt exists.

When Jesus calls us salt, he’s saying we are to be distinct from the rest of the world. **When you taste salt, you know it’s salt. When the world sees a believer, they should know we are a believer.** And as we go about our lives, Jesus calls us to season the world with the goodness of the Kingdom. We are to give the world a taste of what they don’t have and create a spiritual hunger within them. When you get a taste of delicious food you want more. When you get a taste of the satisfying Kingdom of Heaven, you want more. Do people in your life know you are a follower of Jesus? Are you giving them a taste of something they need but don’t have?

The other use Jesus is referring to is salt as a preservative to slow decay. Before refrigeration, uncooked meat wouldn’t last very long before it went bad. Just put a piece of meat on your counter and watch what happens. Science tells us bacteria doubles every 20 minutes in that condition. Covering it in salt slowed its decay and preserved it for future use.

The world is like that piece of meat. It always bends towards decay. Romans 1 says God has given over the world to its wickedness and it continues to head in that direction. The most recent example is what are known as “devious licks”? Heard of that? It’s a new social media challenge that encourages students to steal bathroom fixtures like soap dispensers and toilet paper holders. My youngest said there’s a rumor going around his school that someone took an entire toilet. I have to admit, when I heard that, I was kind of impressed. It’s the latest example of a rebellion and rot that started in Eden and continues today. But that’s where salty Christians come in. Part of our role in a rotten world is to arrest that decay and preserve it, to push back as a cleansing agent and bring life where there is only death.

What decay in the world burdens you? What breaks your heart, enflames your righteous anger, and inspires you to engage? Is it injustice, hate, hunger, the protection of the preborn, trafficking, fatherlessness, broken families? That may be God-given. In all our God-given purpose journeys we pursue what our hearts are burdened with because that may be a clue where God wants us to engage as salt to bring healing to what has decayed. What is it for you?

The second image Jesus uses is light. You are the light of the world. That means we are to be noticeable. Just like the world is in a constant state of decay, it's also in a constant state of darkness, and its citizens stumble wherever they go. But light casts out darkness. It reveals what is true and shows the way. Jesus sends us into the world to be that light. The light we carry is the light of Christ. Matthew tells us Jesus is the light long promised by Isaiah.

[Matthew 4:16] ¹⁶ the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned."

John's Gospel tells us in Jesus was life and his life was the light of men. And when you believe in Christ and enter the Kingdom of Heaven, you become sons/daughters of that light and are indwelt with it. As Philippians 2 says "in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation... you shine as lights in the world." The purpose of that light is to attract others and show the way out of the darkness and into the Kingdom.

I often make my way from the office to the worship center and greenroom, it's normally via the walkway, which is nowhere near the light switch, so I normally come in here when it's dark. It's a treacherous walk in the dark. But there is usually a tiny light that comes from backstage, and it's enough to show me the way. That's what Jesus calls us to here.

You are a follower of Jesus because you were attracted to someone else's light. And now Jesus has put that same light in you to show others the way. We do that through our good works, living out the Beatitudes in word and deed, declaring the Gospel with our mouths and showing the Gospel with our lives. Good works are an outward demonstration of our inward righteousness, fruit of our right relationship with God. And because they are so counter-cultural, when we do them, even unbelievers recognize the goodness of the God who is behind them.

"All day long some of them [the Christians] tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all...(their) deeds were on everyone's lips, and they glorified the God of the Christians." - Eusebius

That is the impact we can have when we live as salt and light. Does that describe you? Jesus doesn't say "you can be" or "work your way to being" salt and light. **You are salt and light**. So then why aren't more of us having that impact? Why do we fail to have the presence and influence Jesus calls us to? Consider these possibilities in your own life.

Fear of suffering. No one wants to suffer. No shame for that. But we can't be surprised when the world pushes back. Salt stings. Walk in salt water next time you have a cut on your foot.

When we confront evil, some will try to wash us off. Light hurts your eyes when it's suddenly turned on. Some will yell, "Turn off that light!", and some will try to turn it off. When pushback comes, our temptation may be back off. We don't want to be accused of intolerance, silly beliefs, hater. We don't want to be marginalized socially, at school, or in our workplace. We'd like to avoid physical harm. So we hide our citizenship, our light. Jesus equates it to putting a lamp under a basket. But **the avoidance of persecution becomes a compromise of our faith**, and our light doesn't shine, and our influence is diminished.

You are a spice rack. You don't want to stand out from the culture, so you take on all its flavors and people are left wondering what your life is all about. It's like when you watch those cooking shows like Chopped and the person loads up so many ingredients the judges say "Wow. You've got a lot going on here and I can't really taste any of this ingredient. It gets lost." When you take on the world's values, run at its pace, prioritize worldly things, and keep God on the margins, your saltiness gets lost. One of the worst things someone can say about us is "I think he/she may be a Christian." It says it's ok to have Jesus as a small part of your life rather than him being at the center. We lose our distinctiveness, and our Kingdom influence is diminished.

Lost joy. Imagine the witness and influence the Kingdom of Heaven had these last 18 months when its citizens lived with joy in the midst of all the pain and darkness. But if our joy goes, we grow dim and bland. We're like a 30 watt bulb trying to light up our church. Ever known anyone who couldn't eat salt? How boring did food become? My dad had to reduce his sodium intake the last couple years of his life. And my stepmom was all over it. She'd come flying in from other rooms when she knew his hand was reaching for the saltshaker. His love for food decreased significantly because it had no taste. When we have no joy in the Lord, we show the Kingdom to be bland. If God is not stirring your heart, you'll struggle to stir anyone else's.

If our influence has waned because we have avoided living as salt and light, how do we get back to living as Kingdom citizens?

List your "others". Jesus says to let our light shine before others. I have a list of all the people I interacted with this last week. They are my others. They are the ones Jesus has asked me to be salt and light to. They are my mission field because they exist where I live, work, and play. When I see their names and think of their faces, I am motivated and inspired to live as salt and light no matter what may come. It's so easy to read this passage and be so nebulous about it that it loses its impact. But if you look at your home, workplace, and social areas as Kingdom outposts from which you are deployed, the call of salt and light becomes personal because you see the people God has sent you to. Define your mission field and ask God to give you a burden for those people specifically.

Move to the city. We can read this passage as Americans and say, "I'm a light." And that would be true. But Jesus speaks of this light as a city on a hill. What's a city? A gathered community. We can shine a light individually, but Jesus has in mind the gathered community of God, which is the Church. Every time you are with your brothers and sisters in Christ, the light of our witness grows brighter, and we get to spur on one another to live as salt and light in the world. **This is not a solo mission. We are to do it together as the family of God.** If you are struggling with it, get with your fellow saltshakers and light bearers and let them encourage you.

Bask in the light. If you want to live out the values of the Kingdom, you've got to spend time with the King. If you want more joy in your life, spend time with the one who says that as we abide in him, his joy will abide in us. And joy shines more brightly the darker it gets. Our hearts are like solar panels, absorbing the light of Jesus and powering our lives to shine that light to others. The more we rest in the light of Jesus, the more we'll desire live a righteous life described in the beatitudes, the more joy we will have, and more light we cast.

We close in the dark with each person turning on their cell phones from left to right. We can fill this room with light. We are called to fill the whole world with light. We have been saved by the Light. We are carriers of the Light. Now let's go be beacons of Light and make Him known.