

## **The Christian's Influence in the World**

How does the Lord God want us to relate to the world? As Christians, how does the Lord God want us to relate to those who are in the world? As those who bear the name of Christ Jesus, how are we to interact and live in a world that is apathetic, antagonistic, and often times hostile to the Lord Jesus Christ and His church? The Word of God answers this question with clarity, practicality, and authority. Scripture calls Christians to stand apart: not conforming to the world, not making friendship with it, not loving it, nor following its course. Understanding this distinct calling is crucial to fulfilling our purpose. The reason is simple: Christians are not of this world.

John 17:14-16 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

Although we live in this world, we are not of this world. Through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, the world has been crucified to us, and we have been crucified to the world. As such, we are very different, and we are to live vastly different from it. But what does this difference look like in practical terms? How is it manifested in our lives and in the way we relate to the world? To answer this, consider how Christians throughout history have often responded by taking one of two extreme positions.

The first extreme is isolation. In a sincere effort to guard and protect themselves from the ungodly and sinful influence of the world, some have sought to isolate and separate themselves from society altogether. This approach is referred to as separatism. This is the belief that faithfulness to Christ Jesus requires a rigid withdrawal from society to avoid moral or spiritual contamination. Historically, this approach was seen in monastic communities, where believers removed themselves from ordinary life in society to pursue holiness through solitude, contemplation, prayer, and study. Their assumption was that distance from society would offer protection and produce purity and godliness. The problem with this approach was theological. At its core, separatism misunderstands the nature of sin. What do you think they found out there—in solitude, in the wilderness, in deserts and caves where they kept themselves? They found sin: depravity, wickedness, and impurity. Even in the most remote places, corruption persists, because it comes not from the outside world, but from within the heart of man. As Jesus said in:

Matthew 15:18-20 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.

The prophet Jeremiah confirmed this truth:

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

In other words, man is not a sinner because he sins; he sins because he is a sinner. No matter how far we run, how distant and remote the place we seek, our sin and corruption will inevitably follow. Isolation from the world cannot remove the sinfulness of the human heart.

Scripture does call us to separate from sin and ungodliness:

2 Corinthians 6:17 Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you,

But the issue is not avoiding sin itself; rather, it is the false idea that we can protect ourselves from the world entirely by removing ourselves from society. True separation is a matter of the heart, not geography. Isolation from the world is not the answer, but its error points us to an important truth: our hearts must be transformed by the Spirit of God, for purity and Christlikeness cannot be secured by simply removing ourselves from society.

The other extreme some Christians have embraced is assimilation into the world—trying to blend in, act like it, and speak like it in the hope of reaching it. In contrast to isolation, this approach also fails to fulfill the Lord God’s design for His people. The main problem with this extreme is that a Christian who has assimilated to the world has lost his distinction from it. Such a Christian no longer bears the image or likeness of his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Christians are called not to imitate, mimic, or mirror the world, but to be transformed into the very image of Christ. As Romans 12:2 warns us:

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Christians who conform to and assimilate with the world will fall headlong into temptation and ruin. This is often seen among pastors. Some believe that to be considered “successful,” they must be trendy, cutting-edge, and hip to contemporary trends and fads, even if it means sacrificing truth for the sake of acceptance. Others feel pressured to adopt the language, behaviors, and mannerisms of the world, even at the cost of compromise, to gain respect and credibility with those they seek to reach. This makes no sense: you do not make the gospel, nor the bride of Christ, more attractive by adorning her with the world’s corrupting fashions. You do not need to look like the world to influence it. You do not need to act like the world to make an impact. You do not need to speak like the world to be heard. Assimilation is not the answer, nor is isolation. So, what is the answer?

How does the Lord God want us to relate to the world? As Christians, how does the Lord God want us to relate to those who are in the world? Please turn with me to the book of Matthew. In this morning’s passage, the Lord Jesus Christ reveals the true role of the Christian in society, showing us the influence we are called to have in the world. Christians are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Matthew 5:13-16 “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. 16 In 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.

The two metaphors the Lord God uses to describe our function, influence, and relationship with the world are salt and light. Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Let’s take a look at each one of these in detail.

Matthew 5:13 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.

To whom does the term “you” refer? In the immediate context, it refers specifically to those who

manifest the Beatitudes. It refers to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. In short, the "you" refers to Christians. The term "you" in v.13 is emphatic. It isn't just a casual pronoun; Jesus is intentionally stressing it. The emphasis is that it is specifically Christians, and no one else, who are called to be the salt and light of the world. He isn't speaking about society in general, or just good people, or moral leaders. He's pointing directly to those who follow Him.

What's the significance of salt? Salt has numerous applications. It seasons food, purifies, cleanses, heals, creates thirst, and it can even irritate. One commentator I referenced noted there are over 14,000 industrial uses for salt and tried to apply many of them to the Christian life. The simplest way to understand salt in this passage is to look at how it was primarily used in the cultural context of Jesus' day. In the ancient world, salt was primarily used as a preservative. Without refrigeration, salt was necessary for preventing meat from decaying. It had to permeate the meat fully to preserve it for regular use. Even as late as the last century, seafarers salted their fish and meat to survive long voyages. Salt was so valuable that wars were fought over it, and entire economies depended on it. Roman soldiers were even paid with salt, hence the word salary, derived from the Latin *salarius*, meaning "salt." Salt also carried figurative meaning: it described eloquent, stimulating speech, speech seasoned with wit and grace. Paul uses this imagery in the book of Colossians.

Colossians 4:6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

So, salt preserves, and salt seasons. How does this relate to us as Christians? How are we the salt of the earth? In what ways are we meant to influence, preserve, and flavor the world around us? The fact that the Lord God calls us the salt of the earth presupposes a decaying and dying world. The world is in a state of ongoing corruption and decomposition. Since the beginning of creation, very little has changed. In the book of Genesis, prior to the great flood, God pronounced on man's depravity:

Genesis 6:5-7 The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6 And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.

In Genesis 1, the Lord God created a perfect and sinless world. All that God had made was very good. In Genesis 3, sin enters the world and spreads like a raging wildfire. In Genesis 6, the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Thus, the Lord God sent a global flood to destroy all of humanity, sparing only eight people, Noah and his family. After the flood, sin continued to endure, multiply, and spread. In Genesis 19, we see that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were considered exceedingly wicked, wholly corrupt, and utterly depraved. In righteous judgment, the Lord God rained down sulfur and fire from heaven, utterly destroying the cities, the surrounding valley, and all that grew on the ground. Since that day, humanity has continued its downward persistent spiral. Even with great developments in medicine, science, and technology, society's decay persists; progress has not brought true righteousness. Man continues to learn but has never arrived at the knowledge of the truth.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, he reminds us that in the last days, difficult times will come:

2 Timothy 3:12-13 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

The world today is in desperate need of preservation. The world today is in desperate need of salt. And you, beloved, you alone, are that salt. By simply living a life consistent with the will of God, by living in a manner that is pleasing and glorifying to Him, by faithfully following in the steps of the Lord Jesus Christ and manifesting His truth, we act as salt in this world. Our influence preserves what would otherwise decay.

Think about the impact that faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ have had throughout history. Consider the First Great Awakening, a revival in England and America at a time when much of Europe was entangled in political upheaval. Even secular writers acknowledge that it was because of the influence of Christians like George Whitefield and John Wesley that England was spared from the full effects of the bloody revolution that devastated France in the late 1700s. Consider William Wilberforce, an English politician who came to Christ at the age of 25. He proved his saltiness by taking a bold stand against the slave trade, even in the face of repeated defeats in Parliament. Though he died on July 29, 1833, just a month before Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, his faithful perseverance helped bring freedom to all slaves in the British Empire. Consider Amy Carmichael, a missionary from Northern Ireland who spent more than 50 years in India rescuing and caring for young girls at risk of exploitation. Through her sacrificial service, she provided hope and a safe haven for hundreds, acting as salt in a world sinking into moral decay. Her constant faith in Christ and her loving actions showed how Christians can be salt—preserving and influencing society through a life fully devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider Corrie ten Boom, an ordinary yet faithful Christian woman in the Netherlands during World War II. She and her family risked everything to hide Jews from the Nazis, standing boldly for righteousness in a dark and evil world. Even when she was imprisoned in a concentration camp, her faith and courage acted as salt—preserving hope, sustaining those around her, and showing the life-changing power of Christ Jesus in the midst of suffering.

These examples show us that being salt is not passive. It requires action, courage, and faithfulness. Salt cannot preserve if it sits idle in a jar on a shelf; it must be rubbed into the meat to do its work. In the same way, Christians cannot remain confined to a pew in their churches. We are called to go and penetrate society, live out our faith, and actively influence the world, preserving it from decay and bringing glory to the Lord God. Salt that sits in a jar does no good. Christians who hide their faith, isolate themselves, or assimilate to the world leave the world to rot and decay. We are called to act, to preserve, and to hold fast in Christ, making a difference in whatever context He has placed us. But the Lord Jesus also warns us:

Matthew 5:13 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.

In Greek, the phrase “lost its taste” means to act foolishly or to become ineffective. Figuratively, it describes losing one’s purpose or usefulness. For the salt of the earth to lose its saltiness is to become ineffective. Lost saltiness is a loss of identity and loss of its God-given purpose. Those who profess to be Christians but cease to be distinct from the world cease to be useful; they cease to be salt; they cease to preserve the decaying world around them. The preservation of this world depends not on what you do or what you say, but on what you are, your character. It depends on your Christlikeness: being poor in spirit, mourning over sin, being meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, being merciful, pure in heart, being a peacemaker, and rejoicing even throughout fierce persecution and suffering. For the world to truly see the Lord Jesus Christ through our lives, we must be different from the world. We must be salt.

Yet it is all too easy for Christians to lose their saltiness, to forfeit their preserving influence in the world. Apathy, carelessness, compromise, hypocrisy, idolatry, pragmatism, and sin all weaken our testimony and dull our witness before a watching world. An intense spiritual battle rages all around us, and the fiercest fighting takes place on the front lines. As Christians, as the salt of the earth, our place is there, on the front line, shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and toe to toe with our enemies. Our mission is obvious: we must hold the line, uphold what is good, and resist the spread of decay around us.

Where are you in this battle? Are you on the front line, standing firm with your brothers and sisters? Are you toe to toe, face to face with the enemy? Or are you five miles back, fiddling with your equipment, debating strategy, arguing with your fellow soldiers, and making excuses? When sin gains a foothold in your life, when your character is compromised, your saltiness, your influence, and effectiveness in this world will be severely hindered.

The Lord God has placed each one of us in this world for a reason. He has placed each of us in this world with a purpose. We are called to penetrate society, to be worked into it like salt into meat, holding back corruption and decay, to preserve, protect, and influence it for His glory. Too often, when the world spirals into greater corruption, Christians throw up their arms and cry foul. We grumble and complain about the injustice, the wickedness, and the decay of the world. We grumble and complain that our comforts, freedoms, and liberties are being infringed upon. We grumble and complain, but fail to act. John Stott comments: rather than blaming the world,

Should we not rather reproach ourselves? One can hardly blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question to ask is: Where is the salt?

Salt preserves. Without salt, decay is inevitable. Likewise, Christians are called to preserve this world. Without Christ, the world deteriorates, and we, as His ambassadors, His hands and His feet, are meant to be the preserving influence of this world—the salt of the earth.

But not only are we the salt of the earth, but we are also the light of the world.

Matthew 5:14-16 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. 16 In 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.

If salt is the influence of our character in the world, then what is the significance of light? Light gives sight. Light enables people to see; it makes vision possible. Light illuminates, exposes, guides, and directs. Light gives life. The fact that the Lord God calls Christians the light of the world presupposes a world that is blind and dark. The world lives in darkness, a domain of obscurity, delusion, confusion, gloom, ignorance, and even death. Light reveals what is wrong and what is right. Light reveals what is false and what is true. It exposes what is hidden and brings clarity to what is obscure. This is the reason for the incarnation. This is why the Lord Jesus Christ became flesh: to give light to those who sit in darkness, to those who walk in the shadow of death, and to light the way before us, leading us into God's truth and peace.

John 1:4-5 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 12:46 I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

John 8:12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

If the Lord Jesus Christ is called the true Light, how is it that we are also called the light of the world? The late Donald Barnhouse, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, explained it this way:

When Christ was in the world, He was like the shining sun—present in the day and gone at night.

When the sun sets, the moon comes up. The moon, which represents the church, shines, but not with its own light. It shines with reflected light from the sun. When Jesus was in the world, He said, “I am the light of the world.” But as He prepared to leave this world, He said, “You are the light of the world.” At times, the church has been like a full moon, flooding the world with light—times of great spiritual awakening, such as the days of Paul, Luther, and Wesley. At other times, the church has been little more than a thin crescent, with very little light shining upon the earth. Yet whether full or faint, waxing or waning, the moon still reflects the light of the sun.

You are the light of the world, but not by nature; your light comes from the true Light. It comes from the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. And as His reflectors, we are called to shine brightly, to have a bold and visible influence in this dark world—just as sunlight bursts through the night.

Remember that intense spiritual battle I mentioned earlier? As salt, we preserve, hold the line, and resist decay. In the same way, as the light of the world, our calling goes beyond preservation. Light does not just hold the line; it advances. Light exposes darkness and shines truth into every dark place. Salt is subtle in its influence; light is not. Salt is a preservative, but it cannot make something new. It can only delay the inevitable. For something to be made new, light must be applied—the light of the gospel. Christians are called to live the truth of the gospel—we are called to be salt. And Christians are called to proclaim the truth of the gospel—we are called to be light. These are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, from the inside out, we influence the world through the character of our lives. On the other hand, we must also shine the light of the gospel openly and clearly, so that all may know the Lord Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross.

Peter addressed the importance of our proclamation of the gospel to the churches of Asia Minor.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

As those who have been called out of darkness, our duty, and our privilege, is to proclaim the light. We are called to proclaim the excellencies of God. The Greek word translated proclaim means to tell out, to declare abroad, to publish. To proclaim the excellencies of God is to tell forth what is not otherwise known, to make it widely known, to broadcast it, and to declare it openly to all.

What are we to proclaim? We are to proclaim the light. We are to proclaim the excellencies of God, His mighty and heroic deeds. We are to proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. We are to proclaim to the world that the Lord Jesus Christ died to save sinners, and that there is salvation in no one else. As Christians, this is our distinct privilege: to tell the world that Jesus Christ has the power to save that He alone is Savior and Redeemer. The world is in darkness. The world is ignorant of the excellencies of God and cannot see them. Therefore, we must proclaim them by shining our light. Charles Spurgeon remarked:

The light of the gospel is full of wonders. As common light is made up of many colors, so the light of God's grace is made up of many marvelous colors—the colors of all the attributes of God. God's grace has been bestowed upon you in order that you may show forth his praises. Note what the Lord has done for you; he has called you “out of darkness” into light, into his light, “into his marvelous light.” What marvelous light that is into which God calls us! Try to measure it by the darkness in which you were; try to measure it by the deeper darkness into which you were going; try to measure it by the eternal darkness which would have fallen upon you if you had died in the dark. God has graciously brought you into his marvelous light.

Each one of us is a living testimony, a living banner, meant to display the excellencies of God: the

virtues of God, the promises of God, and the blessings of God. You are the light of the world. Therefore, both your life and your proclamation must radiate and shine forth the marvelous light of Christ. Light is meant to illuminate. Light is meant to be displayed. It's not meant to be hidden. It's not meant to be concealed. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. You are not called to be a hidden Christian. You are not called to mask or conceal your light. You are called to illuminate and display your light. You are called to put it on a stand and to make it public; to make it shine forth brightly for all the world to see. Do you know why?

Matthew 5:16 In 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.

Through our lives and our testimony, through our words and our works, the world will see our good works and give glory to God. The term good means lovely and beautiful. It speaks of what is helpful, honest, and useful, what is well-suited to fulfill its purpose. The word stresses both outward beauty and practical usefulness. Our purpose in life, our chief aim, is to glorify God. Our good works display the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ and His transforming work in our lives. There should be nothing in our conduct that gives our enemies an opportunity to blaspheme or reproach the name of Christ Jesus, the gospel, or His church. Every believer is a witness of the Lord Jesus Christ, whether he intends to be or not. Our lives are constantly on display before a watching world. The apostle Paul tells us in:

2 Corinthians 3:2 You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.

In other words, the Christian life is a visible witness; it is a letter of recommendation; it is an open book read by everyone who encounters it. Your life is that witness, letter of recommendation, and open book. Your words, works, actions, and reactions make up the pages of that book. How you respond to blessing, misfortune, injustice, ridicule, hurt, suffering, and trials, in small and large matters alike, is being read by the world. For them, your life may be the only Bible they will ever read. Your life may be the only sermon they will ever hear. We possess the truth the world desperately needs, and by conduct, we preach a sermon every day, either commending the Lord Jesus Christ or obscuring Him.

Therefore, our calling is clear: to live in such a way that our lives adorn the gospel of God, so that when the world sees our good works, they may give glory to our Father who is in heaven. The Lord God's command that we glorify Him flows from the purpose for which each one of us was created. He formed us, He made us, and He did so that His glory might be seen through us.

Isaiah 43:6-7 I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, 7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

By God's design, we restrain corruption and slow the moral decay of a fallen world. And at the same time, we are the light of the world. We are called to brightly shine forth the truth of God and to illuminate the darkness with the message of the gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is our God-given function in society. This is how we are to relate to the world around us. We are not called to withdraw from the world, nor to conform to it. We are called to stand within it as salt and to shine upon it as light. And the apostle Paul tells us that as we live this way, God is at work through us:

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these

things? 17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

The circumstances in which you find yourselves today have been ordained by the Lord God. In whatever circumstances you find yourself, you carry the fragrant aroma of Christ Jesus. In your home, school, workplace, neighborhood, this church, you are the fragrance of Christ. To some, that fragrance will be sweet; it will be life and salvation. To others, it will be death, a mark of God's just judgment and holy wrath. But in either case, the Lord God will be glorified as His truth is made known through His people. Therefore, let us be salty Christians, distinct, holy, and faithful. Let us be bright and illuminating Christians, unashamed, visible, and bold. Let us live in such a way that when the world encounters us, it encounters something of Christ Jesus Himself.