

# *American Privilege: Gospel Imperatives*

*Matthew 5: 13-16*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth.” He meant that they were a preserving, healing, flavoring presence in the world. Then he said, “You are the light of the world.” Jesus had said of himself, “I am the light of the world.” The flame in his disciples caught fire from Jesus, the eternal and true light. Sourced in Christ, they were now shining light in a dark world. *You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.*

These words are so familiar to us that we hardly realize how shocking they would have been when Jesus said them. In Jesus’ day, Israel was a beaten nation. Its citizens lived under an occupying military force. Roman soldiers were in every city and town. The Jews were denigrated ethnically. The Romans mocked their religion and despised their zeal for a defeated god. They were heavily taxed. Their lives highly regulated. Autonomy and freedom were distant memories. Discontent seethed in the masses but any actual resistance was quickly crushed. Poor, powerless, oppressed, slighted. Jesus said to this rabble, *You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.* Without offering one political solution, Jesus spoke of another Kingdom. He looked at these marginalized and desperate followers and declared them to be *not victims* but highly needed preservers of life, not lost in the dark but bearers of the flame of faith, the world’s best hope.

These are the startling sentences from Jesus we want to sound through our reflections about the church in the land of America on this Independence Day. This identity Jesus gave to his people is crucial to our understanding our place in the present national moment. We have been talking this year about framing our mission in terms of being a resistant, resilient, and renovative Christian community in a post-Christian world. We can have a gospel to live and to share. That’s true whether we have favor or not. This morning let’s look at four words the church needs to recover in both speech and action.

**1) Duty.** I’ll admit that when I was a scout, our oath sounded a bit square to me. *On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country.* But years later, it sounds so refreshing to me. What an assumption. There is such a thing as

honor. I want to be a person who does honorable things. The more honorable, good, healthy things I do, the more I have a sense of honor to put in service of a higher good. I am called to do my best. To try hard. To accomplish a duty. Something is required of me. Something that makes our city and our nation better. I have a duty to God and a duty to our country. I commit myself to pursuing that duty. Life is not first about my getting to express myself and fulfill my dreams. Life is first about serving the higher purpose of the glory of God and the good of others. Wouldn't it be great if more of us, without waiting for anyone else to get it together, started recovering the idea of duty to God and country?

I witnessed an example of this by your leadership. Last year at the beginning of the pandemic, we applied for and received a check from the government's Payroll Protection Program. We kept on paying our teachers, pastors and staff knowing we had this back up if we needed it. But due to the faithfulness of our congregation's giving, we didn't need it. Now according to the rules, we could have applied for forgiveness and kept several hundred thousand dollars. But your elders decided that money was not ours. We didn't need it and we wouldn't keep it. We paid back the PPP loan, with interest. It was a matter of faith and duty.

**2) *Tolerance.*** A decade ago, tolerance was a popular word. We kept being asked to be tolerant of those with different beliefs. To make room for people with expressions of life that don't fit our own ethics. To be broad minded. To engage in dialogue. To give each other space. As a person with traditional views, I understood that in a democracy, I needed to tolerate and to be kind to all different types of people. But now that the power dynamics have flipped, there is no more talk of tolerance. Only an ever more vigorous enforcement of a new kind of righteousness. A righteous fury wants to deconstruct so much of what we hold dear. Contrary opinions are not allowed to exist, let alone be respected. I miss tolerance. I even miss seeing those "Coexist" bumper stickers. I miss mutual respect.

But even if we are not given respect for views once thought to be the way to life and health and peace, we are still called to give respect. You know how I feel about Critical Theory. This is a worldview that many people adopt today with religious fervor. Yet, it's historically thin, rooted in envy, harshly demanding, and socially divisive. I could slam Critical Theory for the rest of the morning and barely be getting started. But there's a crucial distinction to be made. Critical Theory the worldview is an enemy of the Gospel. But *people* living from Critical Theory are beloved by Jesus. He died for them. And though they may not realize it, people yearn to be liberated from CT's iron law into glorious grace, from striving

for self-generated righteousness to receiving the gift of Christ's righteousness. As one who knows such grace, I'm not allowed to let angry rhetoric bate me into hating and cancelling people whose souls long, just like mine, for the only redemption that leads to life. We're called to forgiveness and to tolerance, to be those who help hold this whole thing together by our kindness and welcome.

**3) History.** As people of the Scriptures, we form around a book rich with two thousand years of history. God's Word tells the truth about our people, the faithfulness and the failures. The present flattening of history into a race-based tale of oppressors and oppressed is exceedingly shallow. Every person, every tribe of humanity is always a mix of goodness and sin, of blindness and insight. To read present values back into the past and completely judge people by one aspect of today's narrow measure is ridiculous.

Imagine the day in the future when at last it has dawned on us, because of the irrefutable overwhelming science, that human life is human life from the moment of conception. We will realize the enormous tragedy of the hundreds of millions of lives taken while nations were under the delusion that a life is not a life. Will we then hunt out every pro-abortion figure in history and try to erase them because they never did anything, ever, in their whole lives that was good or worthy? You can't treat history that way.

We Christians need to resist and refute revisionist history even as we excavate aspects of our history long overlooked or even denied. We need to resist the blanket denigration of our ancestors, the skepticism about their faith, motives and sacrifices. At the very same time, we're called to own the attitudes or even actions of our ancestors from which we would now repent. We need to stop being lazy or afraid and look deep into our heritage. We need to lament what needs lamenting and celebrate what is praiseworthy. It's always mixed.



I've been reading about my Dutch ancestors who came to America in 1847. My great, great grandfather Van Raalte had trained to be a pastor. He became part of a reform movement in the Dutch state church. Van Raalte and his colleagues wanted the church to pull back from liberalizing. They wanted to create their own Christian schools but the state forbade them. They wanted to practice worship according to their beliefs but were forbidden. Nevertheless they went forward. My ancestor was jailed and fined. Meanwhile, the potato famine was not confined to Ireland. The Dutch suffered under a languishing economy and deprivation.

Ultimately, Van Raalte agreed to lead 100 people to America. The voyage took 55 days, two died along the way. They bought land from the US government in Michigan. There, the settlers had to fell their own trees, clear their farm lands, construct their own houses, even in a brutal winter. They didn't come to oppress people but to escape discrimination and poverty. Within a few years, and through many trials, they had created a thriving Christian community.

Their relations with the Indians were friendly, but yes, ultimately the settlers displaced them. Just 18 years after settling, the Dutch sent their sons to fight in the Civil War. They hated slavery and loved President Lincoln. When he was shot, my ancestor called the town to prayer. Shedding his Dutch reserve, Van Raalte broke down and wept into his hands that this great president had died. No, they didn't do well integrating former slaves into their community when they later came north. There certainly was a European sense of racial difference. I own that. But to say that the primary motivation of these Dutch farmers was greed and racism is just bogus history.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the colony, Van Raalte gave a speech in which he said,

With mingled emotion, thanks and joy, the events associated with our arrival as strangers in a strange land today rise before our minds. Out of the depths of affliction our prayer rose to God and His hand brought us to this land...

Beloved, to you who follow us in our field of labor, we are ready with a sense of happiness to bequeath this inheritance. But do not forget that we have received it from God. We received it as God's nursery for eternity and as a work for God's kingdom; we received it prayerfully, out of God's hand and with this inheritance we desire to attain God's end. <sup>1</sup>

We've got to do the work to learn our personal and regional histories. We own the sins even as we own the achievements. Christians are a people of the Bible: our Scriptures are full of the history of a people, some who did terrible things, but through it all we see God's hand leading, redeeming and guiding. "With this inheritance, we desire to attain God's end."

**4) *Gratitude.*** A while ago, I Ubered from Orlando airport to a conference. My driver was gregarious. Born in Haiti, he had come to America in his teens to play soccer. Now he was a proud U.S. citizen. "I love this country," he said, "The electricity works all the time. I came here with nothing but soccer skills. Then my knee blew out, but I got great medical care. I worked hard, and now I have my own

driving business. My wife became an accountant. We have such a great life here. I love America.”

In troubled times, when we’re straining to do better as a nation, it helps to remember just why so many people from around the world want to be here. To me, any discussion about our nation needs to begin with grateful acknowledgement of *American Privilege*. It flows across the tapestry of ethnicities that make up our nation of immigrants. As my driver said, the electricity works all day long. So does the in-flow of clean water, and, importantly, the out-flow of sewage. I’m thankful every Tuesday for the infrastructure of sanitation. They actually take my garbage away! (If I make the effort to put it in the bin).

All anyone has to do in a crisis is dial 911. Within minutes, fire, ambulance or police come no matter who you are. Emergency rooms treat any and every one who comes with astounding medical care, whether you can pay or not. Education from pre K to high school is available to every citizen, including free transportation. Our schools provide 10 meals a week to those who need them. Public assistance offers vouchers for food, housing for the disabled and disadvantaged, and a host of services to the elderly, those fighting cancer, the demented, the physically handicapped, or those with other special needs.

We have 2.7 million miles of paved roads. Pollution controls have cleaned up the air we breathe. Public libraries are heated and cooled for comfort as they offer both print and electronic resources for free to all. There is land to spread out to. There is natural beauty of such variety and magnitude that it takes your breath away. At the city, state and national level we have beautiful parks. Our nation’s resources have created an overflowing abundance of goods in which *everyone* can participate. (A Ralph Lauren polo shirt for \$2 at the Purple Cow: amazing!) Opportunity for social and economic mobility continues to be the envy of the world. The mightiest military in history protects us.

We freely elect our government officials. We govern by rule of law, with powers divided between 3 branches, the model of liberty for the world. We still have remarkable freedom to express our opinions and exercise our religion. Moreover, we have the ability to critique ourselves, to have the conversations that lead to change.

Are we perfect? Of course not! But this July 4<sup>th</sup>, God’s people in this land rise with gratitude for all we have. And respect for those who sacrificed and labored and fought to make it so. Would I prefer the level of religious freedom

that's in Saudi Arabia? Or machine guns on every street corner like in Cairo? Would I prefer the surveillance culture of China? The heritage of ethnic genocides in Bosnia or Rwanda? The dictatorship of Russia? The poverty of the socialist experiment in Venezuela? No, thank you to all of the above.

Even the least among us have great privilege. Even the poor among us have, in the world context, great wealth. American privilege *is* a precious, priceless privilege that undergirds all our national conversations. We must begin, continue and conclude in gratitude for this nation in which God has seen fit to place us.

*You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.* A church that understands this knows we have duties to fulfill whether we are appreciated or not. We have tolerance and kindness to offer even to those caught in hostile world views. We have history to lament and history to celebrate. Shared gratitude can create unity in our fractured society. We can be infectious with joyful, open-hearted, open-handed kindness. We can lead in overflowing thanksgiving for all that God in Christ has done for us. Not least of which is the incredible blessing of being Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Michel, *With This Inheritance: Holland Michigan—the Early Years* (Spring Lake, MI: River Road Publications, 1996), frontispiece and p. 67.