

BE TRULY DIFFERENT**MATTHEW 5:13-16**

Let's go to our text immediately today, but let me make a small change that affects mostly those who are involved in our Bible Chat opportunity. Originally, I had wanted us to consider Matthew 5:13-20 today, but the more I looked at v. 17-20, the more I felt that they belong more with v. 21 and what follows. So, today, we're going to just consider v. 13-16. This coming week, then, when you and your Bible Chat partner get together for your discussion – just cover v. 13-16 – and leave v. 17 and what follows for next week. My apologies for causing any confusion!

What does it mean to be salt and light? You've probably never heard of an evangelist by the name of Mordecai Ham. Through his ministry many hundreds and thousands of people in our country made a commitment to Jesus in the first half of the 20th century. It was through Mordecai Ham's preaching in Charlotte that a young farm boy from North Carolina walked down the aisle to accept Jesus as his Savior. That young man's name? Billy Graham. Doesn't the name "Mordecai" evoke the image of a barely literate, red neck preacher wearing a bad suit and yelling a lot? Actually, however, Mordecai Ham had a background in business and law, communicated very well with professionals, and was quite slick and cultured in his personal appearance.

But his style of ministry did sort of match his interesting name. When he held a community wide preaching event, he insisted on being taken to the people in town who had the reputation for being the worst sinners of all. On one occasion, Ham literally tracked an older man with a notorious reputation into a cornfield. The old man had heard about Mordecai Ham, had heard he was coming to see him, and was hiding out in this cornfield. Once the two men faced each other amidst the cork stalks, the old man asked Ham anxiously about what he intended to do. Ham said he was going to ask God to kill the old man! Death was entirely appropriate for someone who had poisoned his entire family against God. When the man protested, Ham observed that shouldn't bother him since he apparently didn't believe in God anyway. The old man begged Ham not to pray such a prayer, so Ham volunteered to pray for the man's salvation instead. At his final meeting in that town, Mordecai Ham baptized that old man and his entire family. Is that what Jesus means when He calls us to be salt and to be light?

Sometimes God needs His people to be very blunt, direct, even confrontational. On other occasions, God needs His people to be very gentle and diplomatic. The truth is that there's many different ways to be salt and light. But here's the bottom line. God wants you to be different from this world and He wants you to make a difference for Him. We're in the midst of a message series I'm calling "Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: Gracious Demands, Not Optional Suggestions." By using these metaphors of salt and light, Jesus is describing the kind of influence His followers will have on those around them. So, let's take a closer look at what Jesus was getting at by referring to you, me, and anyone who follows Him as salt and light.

THE DIFFERENCE SALT MAKES

Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.” (Mt 5:13 NLT) Salt has had many different uses throughout history. When you understand those uses, you begin to understand how Jesus envisioned you and me being different and making a difference for Him. For instance, salt preserves. It was used as a preservative before refrigeration was invented. When salt was rubbed into food products – especially fresh meat – it preserved it from decay for a period of time. Jesus is implying that the world has a tendency to decay or rot morally and spiritually more quickly without the presence of His followers in the world. As the salt of the earth, you’re called to preserve what is godly and right in this world.

Bless their hearts, there are still some folk out there who think that human beings are gradually evolving into greatness. They say, “Sure, things look pretty bad in some ways, but just given enough time and enough education, we’ll solve all of our problems – war, poverty, terrorism, racism, hatred.” True, human beings have made great strides in areas like science, medicine, and technology. But all you have to do is watch the daily news or surf the Internet and just observe the many wars, the acts of terror, the murders, the rapes, the financial greed, the oppression of the poor, the sheer unfairness of so much of life to know that this world is a colossal mess spiritually and morally. All the evidence points to this world getting worse not better.

So, if as disciples of Jesus – and every follower of Jesus is, by definition, a disciple of Jesus – we’re called to preserve what is godly and right in this world, what does that really mean in everyday life? It means you’re called to personal integrity. It saddens me that non-Christians still list as their number one reason for not becoming Christians the perception that we’re hypocrites. Sure, that perception is often a cop-out, but the fact is that we don’t always practice what we preach very well. When a follower of Jesus loses personal integrity, you become like tasteless salt says Jesus. So, do you tell the truth? Do you treat people with respect even if you differ from them? Do you pay your bills? Are you honest financially? Are you sexually immoral? Do you forgive those who insult you? Do humility and kindness show up in your interactions with others or pride and indifference? When you mess up – personal integrity is not perfection, by the way – do you apologize or make excuses for yourself? You can slow down the moral, spiritual decay of this world by the influence of your personal integrity.

Salt preserves. Salt, also, bites and stings. If you put salt in an open wound, it will sting. Jesus never called Christians to be “the honey of the world.” I get very nervous when the Christian faith gets associated with being Democrat or Republican or liberal or conservative. I believe that when Christians are truly being salt, it will bite and sting our culture in many ways. Our primary allegiance to Jesus ought to “sting” every group. After all, we follow King Jesus, not our culture, not our political party, not our social philosophy. For example, we’re called to love women who have had abortions and treat them with dignity while, at the same time, recognizing the act of abortion for the abomination that it is before God. As Christians we should never reject, despise, or condemn fellow human beings for any reason. Of course not! But some behaviors in our culture just need to be stood up against and resisted. Right now evangelical

Christians are feeling a lot of pressure from our culture to cave into the notion that homosexual lifestyles are just as acceptable to God as heterosexual relationships. Homosexual sex and gay marriage will never be acceptable to God regardless of what our culture says. By the same token, we evangelical Christians been slow historically to condemn racist attitudes and behavior. May God forgive us! We've sometimes been associated with those who want to rape the environment. Can anyone who believes the creation story in Genesis not be an environmentalist? We've been associated with those who seem to care less about those who have less. You can't read the Bible and escape God's concern for the poor, those who get taken advantage of in life, and those who lack adequate food and medical care.

Now sometimes the culture is going to bite and sting back! That's my second cousin, Chaplain Wes Modder. He's a chaplain in the United States Navy and - with no intention to do so - made national headlines in this past year. In a private counseling session with Navy sailors at their request, he warned them against both pre-marital sex and gay sexual relations. In December of last year, a five page official complaint was made against him. My cousin was removed from his duties and told to clear out his office by the Navy. He received a "detachment for cause" letter in February of this year from his commanders for being "intolerant" and "unable to function in a diverse and pluralistic environment." His reputation and Navy career were threatened. Just earlier this month, the Navy Personnel Command exonerated my cousin clearing him of any wrongdoing. He will likely be able to retire in good standing while he nears his 20th year of service. Wes Modder's story had a good ending, but as Christians we can all wonder what standing for what honors God and standing against what dishonors Him will mean for any and all of us in the years ahead. The culture is going to bite and sting back!

Salt preserves. Salt bites and stings. Salt creates thirst. As the salt of the earth, you're called to make others spiritually thirsty for God. I remember some years ago enjoying a Virginia ham. It was delicious, but I was getting a drink of water about every 15 minutes after I ate it. Do you make anyone thirsty for a relationship with God? True, you'll turn some people off. The good news about Jesus cuts right into human pride. The message that you can never meet God's moral standards in your own strength is very offensive to some people. The idea that Jesus had to die for you because you're morally unacceptable to a holy God borders on the insulting to some people. But the people God is drawing to Himself will see the authenticity of your walk with God, and it will make them thirsty to know God like that. When your relationship with God makes you vibrant, joyful, generous, forgiving, and caring, they'll have to face the blandness and dullness of their own lives. When your relationship with God gives you strength and faith right in the midst of life's struggles and heartaches, they will become thirsty for the God who alone can give you that kind of stability and security in this life.

Salt preserves. Salt bites and stings. Salt creates thirst. Here's one more. Salt adds flavor. It enhances and brings out the flavor of food. As the salt of the earth, you're called to add the flavor of God to all of life. Followers of Jesus ought to be the most interesting, alive people out there. Shame on you if you're boring! Here's a great irony. People who reject Jesus often suggest that the Christian life is bland and tasteless.

Sadly, they believe that abusing drugs or alcohol, or having immoral sex, or pursuing money and the things money can buy, or chasing after all kinds of new, recreational and leisure activities is what adds fun and excitement to life. But those who reject Jesus are the ones who end up with tasteless, bland lives inevitably. Take a big old bite out of this world and your reaction – maybe not immediately, but over time – will be, “Yuck! Pretty tasteless!” Why? Because Jesus gives real flavor to life. The more you know Jesus, love Jesus, and follow Jesus, the more you will experience the colors, the flavors, and all the tastes of life as God intended. You’re called to be the salt of the earth. You’re called to be different and to make a difference.

THE DIFFERENCE LIGHT MAKES

Jesus also says, “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” (Mt 5:14-16 NLT) You and I, as Jesus’ followers, are the light of the world. What does Jesus assume by using that metaphor? This world is a place of utter spiritual, moral darkness. Now, people who don’t follow Jesus rarely see this world in that way. With the creation of the Internet, we’ve seen an explosion of knowledge like never before in human history. We’re living through one of the greatest information revolutions ever experienced. Information on every conceivable subject is literally a mouse click away. Yes, people know more and are educated more than ever before.

But that doesn’t mean more people know God better. That’s getting less and less. When you combine a decreasing lack of knowledge about God with an increasing knowledge about everything else, it can be a dangerous combination. God gave human beings the ability to understand atomic energy and harness its power. We turned around and created weapons of mass destruction. We’re on the threshold of creating life artificially through cloning and genetic engineering. But already you hear scary stories of how some people are lining up to exploit this new knowledge in immoral ways. All sorts of spiritual counterfeits are available out there for your consumption – everything from human potential nonsense to psychic blather to bizarre rituals. Just look around! Despite all of our increased knowledge, marriages are still failing, families are still crumbling, and so many people’s lives are achingly and awesomely dark.

I understand that if you visit Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, the guide will on occasion turn off the extensive system of lights in one of those large underground spaces after giving everyone a warning. The absolute blackness is totally disorienting. It really is so dark that you can’t see your hand in front of your face! After a few seconds of complete blackout, the guide lights one match. One tiny match can light up an entire cavern of thousands of utterly dark, square feet.

Jesus says you and I are a light in the world’s blackness. How can that be so? Because Jesus is the real light. He said, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.”

(Jo 8:12 NLT) When you become a citizen of God's Kingdom, you become one of God's lights into a dark world. Even though you and I still have some substantially dark areas in our own lives spiritually, God gives us the capacity to reflect the light of Jesus into a dark world. Here's an analogy that helps me understand that truth. Think of yourself as the moon. Does the moon generate any light of its own? No. It's a dark, lightless object all by itself. When you see it all lit up there in the sky, it's reflecting the light of the sun. We call it full moon and a full moon can put out a considerable amount of light. Why, you can even read a newspaper on a clear night with a full moon shining! But sometimes the moon comes between the sun and the earth. We call it an eclipse. The sun's light is dulled when that happens. Once you become a follower of Jesus, you can reflect fully the light that is Jesus Himself. That's what the Bible means by being filled with the Holy Spirit. But you can also cause a spiritual eclipse. When you disobey Jesus for any reason, you get in the way of Jesus' light and dull it. You find that imagery all over the Bible. For instance, it says, "For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true." (Eph 5:8-9 NLT)

As the light of the world, you're called to let your light shine out. Any light – be it a chandelier, a candle, a lantern, or a flashlight – has one purpose. Give light! You have one purpose as a disciple of Jesus: reflect His light to others. That means your faith in Jesus can never be private. Personal, certainly, but never private. Contrary to what our culture says, you can't be a real follower of Jesus and keep it to yourself. That makes as much sense as turning on your bedside lamp and then throwing a heavy blanket over it. What's the point? What's the point of being secret about the fact that you love and follow Jesus? Your life ought to be perfectly visible to anyone and everyone. There's nothing quite so useless or pathetic than a follower of Jesus who refuses to shine!

You're also called to shine out regardless of the consequences. There are people out there who love spiritual darkness and hate the light. Why? Light has the ability to expose what's there in the darkness. Don't be surprised, then, when you get treated with hostility by some people for no apparent reason. They don't like God or the light He shines. They see God's light in you, it's shining on them, and it's making them uncomfortable, to say the least. By the same token, there are those in the darkness who long for the light. They want God, but they might have difficulty finding Him. They don't mind getting exposed, because they so want a way out of the darkness. It's to those people that God sends you and me so they can move toward the real Light of the world – Jesus Himself. You're called to be the light of the world. You're called to be different and to make a difference. That's a decision on your part and mine.

TO BE DIFFERENT AND TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IS A DECISION.

It is, first of all, a decision you and I make every day all day. Jesus doesn't say, "You should be the salt of the earth. You should be the light of the world." He doesn't say, "You will be the salt of the earth. You will be the light of the world." No, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." That tells me that Jesus is describing something true of you and me – and every one of His followers - every day

all day. It's not just about the future, but more about the present. It's not about what should be, but about what is. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world right now today all day all the time.

It is, secondly, a decision to get shaken out and to turn on the light of my life. Yes, the world is decaying morally. Yes, it's a dark place spiritually. That doesn't provide you or me an excuse to stay safe in our saltshakers – so to speak – hiding behind our fears and feelings of inadequacy. It doesn't mean we just let the world go to hell quite literally. You and I aren't called to a private faith, but one that makes a difference. You and I must be shaken out and then rubbed into this world, this culture, like salt rubbed into meat. You and I must remove any heavy blanket covering up the light of our lives. You and I must allow God to shake us out into all the corners of our world and turn us on so that the neighborhoods we live in, the schools we attend, the places we work in, the community we're a part of, and even the family to which we belong experiences Jesus through and in us.

It is, thirdly, a decision to make yourself useful not useless to God. I don't believe you can ever lose your personal value to God regardless of what you do or don't do. But I absolutely believe that you have a real choice as to whether you will add value to God's work in this world or take away value from His work in this world. How is that possible? When you practice personal integrity because you love Jesus and want to please Him, you add value to what God is doing in this world. If you don't, you diminish God's work. When you help others become spiritually thirsty for God, you add value to what God is doing in this world. When you don't, you obstruct God's work. When you reflect the light of Jesus through your words, your actions, and your attitudes, you add value to what God is doing in this world. If you don't, you take away from God's work. When you decide to get out of the saltshaker or take the heavy blanket off your life, you add value to what God is doing in this world. When it comes to God's work in this world – His passion to bring men, women, boys and girls into His forever family – are you useful or useless? To be different and to make a difference is a decision.

Howard Hendricks was a long time professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. He says the greatest witness for Jesus in the city of Dallas isn't a preacher. He's an ophthalmologist named Jack Cooper. Dr. Cooper was in the power structure of an evangelical church for 12 years and never led one soul to Jesus. One day, a group of college kids came along and said, "Hey, Doc, are you sharing your faith?" Dr. Cooper said, "No, as a matter of fact, I'm not. I don't even know how to go about it." They said, "We've got a little training program. How about getting involved in it?" He said, "Count me in." Jack Cooper leads people to Jesus now like it's going out of style. Howard Hendricks was way out in some remote section of India speaking and he told this story as an illustration without ever using Jack Cooper's name. After all, who would know Jack Cooper way out there? Afterwards, a doctor came up and said to Hendricks, "You were talking about Jack Cooper, weren't you?" Hendricks said, "How did you know?" This doctor said, "I went to medical school in Dallas. While I was there, I went to see Jack Cooper about my eyes. He led me to Christ and disciplined me all the way through med school." Today, that doctor is the only licensed neurosurgeon in that part of India.

He has incredible impact and influence for Jesus. Talk about being different and making a difference! He will tell you it all started in the office of a Dallas eye doctor who knew why God had put him on this planet: to be different and to make a difference.

Do you know why God put you on this planet? Do you know why He sent Jesus to die for you on the cross and to rise again? To be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The question isn't whether you are salt and light. Jesus says if you're His follower, you are already salt and light. But here's the question. Are you salt that's being shaken out? Are you a light that's been turned on?