

## Influencing a World Gone Mad Matthew 5:13-16

Peter Marshall, who served as chaplain for the US Senate liked to tell the following story, which has relevance for our passage in **Matthew 5:13-16**.

There was a quiet forest dweller, known as the keeper of the spring who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slopes of the Alps. The old gentleman had been hired years earlier by a young town council to clear away the debris from the pools of water that fed the lovely spring flowing through their town. With faithful, silent regularity he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches, and wiped away the silt from the fresh flow of water. By and by, the village became a popular attraction for vacationers. Graceful swans floated along the crystal clear spring, farmlands were naturally irrigated, and the view from restaurants was picturesque.

Years passed. One evening the town council met for its semiannual meeting. As they reviewed the budget, one man's eye caught the salary figure paid to the obscure keeper of the spring. Said the keeper of the purse, "Who is the old man? Why do we keep him on year after year? For all we know he is doing us no good. He isn't necessary any longer!" By unanimous vote, they dispensed with the old man's services.

For several weeks nothing changed. By early autumn the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools, hindering the rushing flow of water. One afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the spring. A couple days later the water was much darker. Within another week, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks and a foul odor was detected. The millwheels moved slower, some finally ground to a halt. Swans left as did the tourists. Clammy fingers of disease and sickness reached deeply into the village.

Embarrassed, the council called a special meeting. Realizing their gross error in judgment, they hired back the old keeper of the spring...and within a few

weeks, the river began to clear up.

Although just a fanciful story, the message is clear and directly relates to our passage and the times in which we live. What the keeper of the spring was to the village, Christians are to the world.

Chuck Swindoll writes that "The preserving, taste-giving bite of 'salt' mixed with the illuminating, hope-giving ray of 'light' may seem feeble and needless...but God help any society that attempts to exist without them! You see, the village without the keeper of the spring is a perfect representation of the world system without the salt and light of God's servants."

If I were to place one word over this passage it would be the word **INFLUENCE**. If we understand what Jesus is saying, it would be the need for His followers to influence their world. Either the world is influencing us or we are influencing the world.

The past couple of weeks there has been a lot of attention given to the movement that is happening at Asbury University. Some see it as a genuine moving of God in students who are seeking Him by repenting of sin and desiring a renewal in their commitment to Christ. Others see it with an eye of skepticism and look at it as a threat like the January 6 takeover of the capital and see it as having the potential of Christian nationalism. Others view it as just hyped-up emotionalism. Some debate whether what is happening can truly be called a revival. We cannot nor should we speculate on the nature of what is happening in Kentucky and at other places around the country. If it is nothing but hyped-up emotionalism, nothing lasting will come of it, but if it is truly an outpouring of God's Spirit in a spiritual awakening, nothing will stop it and the evidence will be seen in a long-lasting transformation that will be sweeping through the nation and influencing people for the gospel. Time will tell whether what is happening will have an influence on communities. But I would also add that what we are witnessing in our culture is a pressing concern.

### I. A PRESSING CONCERN

It is no surprise that we are living in a world that is out of control.

### A. A World Out Of Control

We have talked in the past number of weeks how the sin nature affects our character and our conduct. Sin is the petri dish of lying, murder, lust, greed, rebellion, anger, hate, unforgiveness, revenge, disobedience, selfishness, and the like. It used to be that many crimes were committed in the cover of night, but now there is a brazen attitude that has permeated culture where crimes are committed in broad daylight with little concern of consequences.

I did a search of crimes for our zip code. While the neighborhood where we live received an A+ rating, the neighborhood just ½ mile away north of Hill Rd. received an F rating. In our zip code a crime of some kind is committed every 4 ½ hours, which includes violent crimes, property crimes and other miscellaneous crimes.

In case you are wondering, the area around the church has an A+ rating.

We watch the national news and see the crime rates spiking in major cities. It doesn't help that some cities are eliminating bonds from holding people in prison who have been caught in some crime. As soon as they're processed, they're set free, inviting them to go out and do it all over again.

In 2021, the New York Times had an article about retail theft happening in San Francisco. Stores are closing because the city is refusing to do anything to curtail the crime wave. The NY Times said San Francisco could easily be dubbed the Shoplifting Capital of the USA. Bold thefts are caught on camera in smash and grab robberies. During the day, robbers cleared out an entire store. In Neiman Marcus, expensive handbags were stolen as robbers ran out the door into waiting cars. A robber rode his bike down the aisles of a Walgreens loading a garbage bag with goods and then rode on out the store. Other stores are reducing hours to limit the exposure to theft. It's a sad state of affairs when stores have to lock up shampoo and toothpaste

behind security locks.

In 2014, California adopted proposition 47, which made thefts less than \$950 a misdemeanor. When criminals found out that it was unlikely they would be arrested or prosecuted for anything less than \$1000, theft increased. Employees are told not to interfere so they won't get hurt. Many crimes aren't even reported.

We often hear about the increase in violent crimes around the country. To borrow the title of a movie from the 1960's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. Because of sin, this is a world out of control.

But there is another troubling trend in our country and within churches and that is a Christian out of character.

### B. A Christian Out Of Character

Speaking broadly here, the church in America has become too much like the world. When we are more concerned about the gimmicks used to bring people to church than we are about proclaiming and living the gospel, we have lost our influence. When we are more concerned about fitting in with culture or adopting the ways of culture instead of living a transformed character, we have lost our influence. When we forget that we are aliens passing through this world on our way to an eternal home, we have lost our influence.

Jesus wrote to the church of Ephesus because they had left their first love and had lost their influence. He wrote to the church of Thyatira because they had adapted practices of the world around them and had lost their influence.

When we live like and act like the world, when there is no distinguishable difference other than we go to church on Sunday and they don't, then we have lost our influence. When the church begins to change its beliefs to align with the culture, we have lost our influence.

There is a reason Paul said to come out from among them and be separate.

### II Corinthians 6:14-7:1

When we no longer have the kind of reverence we should for God, we will become like the world and lose our influence.

Nebuchadnezzar knew what he was doing when he assimilated the youth of those he had conquered into the Babylonian culture. Strip them of their identity by giving them new, Babylonian names; strip them of their heritage and culture by dressing them like Babylonians, teach them a new language, give them food that otherwise was forbidden for them to eat and you strip away their influence.

When we allow the culture to change us, we lose our influence to change the culture. There is a pressing concern. On one hand, we live in a world steeped in sin that is out of control. On the other hand, there are Christians who are out of character. In **Matthew 5:13-16**, Jesus gives us a personal call.

## II. A PERSONAL CALL

We have spent eight weeks looking at a portion of the Sermon on the Mount known as the Beatitudes. We cannot come to this point of obeying the command of Jesus in these verses unless we have first addressed the issues of the heart that begin with acknowledging that we are spiritually bankrupt apart from God by admitting we are totally hopeless without Him. When we realize that we need God, He gives us the promise of living in His kingdom. When we mourn over our sin, we receive His comfort from the forgiveness He provides us when we confess and repent. A change in our heart takes place when the Holy Spirit begins to make us into the character of Christ. We begin to want to live like Him. But when we begin to change from the inside out letting His character be evident in how we act and talk, the world will take notice and some won't like it. They don't like the light that shows their darkness. As Paul told Timothy, those who desire to live a godly life will be persecuted. Jesus said that if the world hated Him, His followers could expect that the world will hate them as well.

Jesus says in our passage that if we really live a life of righteousness, then we will be an influence for righteousness in our world.

John MacArthur writes that **"Whoever lives according to the Beatitudes is going to function as salt and light."**

Our character will either consciously or unconsciously affect others for better or for worse. We will either point people to Christ by how we

live or point people away from Christ.

Elihu Burret stated **"Everywhere [men] will have companions who will be better or worse because of us...we are forming characters for eternity."** The question is which destination will they spend theirs.

Jesus first talks about our uniqueness.

### A. Our Uniqueness

He begins with an emphatic **"you"**. Literally it reads: **"You are the ONLY salt and you are the ONLY light in the world."**

You may be the only Christian in your class. You may be the only Christian in your neighborhood.

You may be the only Christian where you work. It's not a time to hunker down and hide and hope you get through the day undetected. The Lord has called you to be a witness in that place. But in that place you are to be as different from those around you as water is different from oil. Chuck Swindoll calls it being **"authentically different."**

I'm reading a book by Alistair Begg titled The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances. It's the story of Joseph. His life is a testament to how Jesus says we are to live.

Alistair Begg writes **"It is the accompanying presence of God in the life of His servant that makes the servant distinctive. Somehow, it is apparent to people that there is a different dimension in the life of God's servant."**

Joseph's story begins in **Genesis 37**. He has 11 sons. Joseph is the favored one. Circumstances surrounding his brothers left them out of favor elevating Joseph in his teen years to top spot. He was, though, a bit of a dreamer. Not in the sense that he had his head in the clouds daydreaming about this and that, but had God-given dreams that didn't make a lot of sense to him or to his family, but who mocked him for them. Those dreams got under the skin of his brother. Jealousy, anger, hatred all fueled what happened next. When dear old dad sent Joseph to check up on how the sheep were faring, their festering hatred for him resulted in hatching a quick plan to get rid of him. Murder was the consensus, but Reuben, who was the oldest, insisted they throw him in a pit instead. He hoped to

rescue the boy and send him back home safe and sound. But his plan went south when he returned to find that the other nine brothers had sold Joseph as a slave to some Midianites.

We skip over to **chapter 39** and the Midianites sold him to the Captain of the guard who was in charge of making sure no one plotted an insurrection against Pharaoh. Joseph is thrust into a new culture against his will. Where once he was free to roam the hills near his home, now he was a slave with no freedom. He didn't know the language and he didn't know the culture. He could either resign himself to his fate and live a life of despair, which gave every opportunity for anger, hatred, unforgiveness, bitterness, and thoughts of revenge if he ever got free, or he could make the best of a bad situation. Maybe in the quietness of his bunk at night he began to think about what he had learned from his father and his grandfather about trusting God even in bad situations. He was just a boy when they moved from Padan-Aram back to the land of his grandfather. I'd like to think that they sat and talked about what it meant to trust in God. I'd like to think that Joseph would ask Grandpa Isaac to tell the story again and again about taking that trip to the mountain of God to make a sacrifice and how Great Grandpa Abraham had tied him up to make him the sacrifice, but how God provided a ram instead because He saw how great Abraham's faith was.

Joseph had learned before he found himself in Egypt what it was to trust God and so now, even in this desperate time he determined to live his life trusting God. How easy it would have been to chuck it all aside and say that it wasn't any use trying to live by faith, especially when he was the only worshipper of God in the whole land of Egypt. Besides, who would know? There wasn't anyone there to encourage his faith. He was on his own.

I think it was his trust in God that made Joseph a hardworking, loyal servant, but it wasn't his work ethic that got him noticed. **Genesis 39:3** says that his master noticed that **"the Lord was with him and gave him success."** When you choose to stand out for the Lord even in a culture that doesn't favor you, you don't have to say anything, your actions will speak for themselves. When everyone else is taking it easy when the boss isn't looking, when everyone else is standing around the water cooler

telling off colored jokes, when everyone else has a foul mouth, when everyone else is cutting corners and you aren't participating, you will be noticed.

Just when Joseph thought things were looking up for him, he was falsely accused. Our verse from last week said we will be persecuted for righteousness and things got worse for Joseph. He was doing his best to live a godly life of faith in a pagan culture and he ended up in jail. If ever there was a time to throw an angry fist at God, to give up on God, it would have been then. But Joseph kept his faith and continued doing what he had always done, trust God. The prison warden saw in Joseph the same thing Potiphar saw in him that God was with him.

No matter what kind of environment you find yourself in, no matter how spiritually toxic it is, when you choose to live a life of righteousness, the Lord is with you.

Fast forward a couple of chapters and we now find Joseph standing before the most powerful man in the world. He's still a prisoner, but he had been called because all the religious diviners couldn't interpret Pharaoh's dreams. But a lowly prisoner is summoned. He removed all doubt as to where his ability to interpret dreams came from. It was from God. Pharaoh was forced to admit that there is a God who exists above all the gods of Egypt. Again, because Joseph chose to influence the culture instead of letting the culture influence him, God was with him. He would be a light in that spiritually dark place. Joseph was removed from prison and elevated to second in command of the nation. He got married, but didn't let her alter his faith or life. He maintained his godly character. In time he and his Egyptian wife have a couple kids. Instead of giving them Egyptian names, he gave them Hebrew names. Manasseh means God has made me forget my troubles. He didn't mean that he forgot his heritage or his uniqueness, but forgot his pain.

When his brothers show up to buy food, neither his past circumstances nor the culture in which he now lived changed his character. When the culture says it's okay to hold a grudge, he chose to forgive. When the culture says to treat them in the same way they treated you, he chose to be kind. When the culture says it's okay to be angry and bitter, he chose to love his brothers.

We have one more stop in the journey of Joseph's life. Time may have passed, but not his devotion to God. Through it all he remained faithful to God. He never let his circumstances strip him of his character or influence. Persecution for righteousness can strip you of a lot of things: your name, your family, your freedom, your wealth, your status, but don't let it strip you of your character. When we understand the sovereignty of God as Joseph did and choose to walk by faith, we are salt and light.

In our passage, Jesus talks about our uniqueness. He then speaks about our responsibility.

## B. Our Responsibility

### “You are”

He didn't say you were.

He didn't say you will be.

He said you are. Right now, where you are, what you are doing, who you are with, you are salt and light. The word “are” stresses being not doing, your conduct always follows your character.

Chuck Swindoll sums it up by saying “If I read Jesus's words correctly, I see more than being salt and light. I am responsible for my salt not losing its bite and my light not becoming obscure or hidden. Every once in a while it is helpful to ask some very hard questions of myself. True servants do more than talk. We refuse to become the ‘rabbit-hole Christians’ John Stott speaks of, popping out of our holes and racing from our insulated caves to all-Christian gatherings only to rush back again. For salt to be tasted and for light to be seen, we must make contact. We are personally responsible.”

Salt does no good left in the shaker. It's only effective when it's out of the container. Jesus made it very clear that light is ineffective if it's hidden under a basket. We need to get out of our sanctified gatherings and rub shoulders with the world to be an influence and we can't do it by sitting in services with the windows open hoping the music or the message will float out the window to our neighbors. We need to be out there living our faith. People are more likely to be influenced by how we live than by what we say. Now, don't get me wrong, we still need to share the gospel, but our lives should back up our message by living the gospel. Jesus is our example of someone who could preach the message

of the Kingdom of God and hang out with the town reprobates influencing them but not being influenced by them, not conforming to them.

The personal call Jesus has given us is to understand our responsibility.

In this personal call of Jesus, there is one more thing we need to keep in mind and that's our influence.

## C. Our Influence

The culture wants us to adopt and adapt to its system, to its way of thinking. Compromise and we can all get along. But again, Jesus wants us to stand up and be different in character. People will notice and it will be an influence on them.

When my brother graduated from boot camp and he said his goodbye's to the drill sergeant, I overheard him tell another drill sergeant that he never heard one curse word come out of his mouth.

During training they had to take a sex-ed class. When the topic of contraception came up, the instructor asked if anyone used any type of contraception. My brother raised his hand and said abstinence. While there were a few snickers in the room, others went up to him afterwards and said they wished they had done that.

As I said earlier, we will be an influence on others. It just depends on whether it's good or bad.

Alistair Begg said that “God never calls us to an action that He does not enable us to complete... We can be certain that He will supply the power of the Spirit that will enable us to do the job.”

So, if He called us to be salt and light we don't have to try and be a preservative or point the way in our own ability. He gives us what we need to carry those tasks out.

**II Peter 1:3-4 “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”**

With the wickedness in the world, it is no secret that there is a pressing concern. That's why Jesus gave

us a personal call to live a godly life so that we can influence it for Christ. Let me close with a thought or two about this being a present command.

### III.A PRESENT COMMAND

We have been talking about it so let me just spell it out for us. We are to be salt and we are to be light.

#### A. Be Salt

Some interpret that to mean that salt being white, speaks of purity, and means that we are supposed to be pure, perhaps looking back at the Beatitude to be pure in heart. We can certainly understand our need to pursue godliness in a wicked culture.

Others suggest it emphasizes flavor, referring to how we live as adding flavor to the world by our godly example. Someone wrote that “we Christians have no business being boring. Our function is to add flavor and excitement to the world.”

Some believe that Jesus is saying just the opposite. Instead of being flavor, we are to sting the world as salt stings a wound. Make it uncomfortable by pointing out its wickedness.

That said, at times we fail to influence the world because we are afraid of offending others, failing to confront them with the truth of sin and need of salvation.

Still others look at the verse and interpret it to mean that we are to create thirst just as salt creates thirst.

While those have merit, I believe that the primary emphasis is on being a preservative. Our godly influence should arrest moral decay. Before the days of refrigeration, the main way to preserve food from spoiling was to add salt. We are meant to have an influence in our culture that arrests the moral depravity that would otherwise make the world more wicked than it already is.

Chuck Swindoll tells of a marriage custom they practiced in the hot days of a Texas summer. When someone got married they would remove the hubcaps of the getaway car and fill it with shrimp. After a few days of hot sun and rotting shrimp, there was an odor that made both bride and groom wonder if the other had forgotten deodorant. If you want shrimp to be preserved, you have to add salt.

Swindoll adds this thought: “A society characterized by savage violence and the darkness of depravity and deception will, without a preservative, deteriorate...and, ultimately, self-destruct. Because servants of Christ are like salt on society, our influence is essential for society’s survival.”

Now there is an all-important word in the text that we need to notice. It’s that three-letter word **“but.”** **“But if salt has become tasteless”**, if it has lost its bite, it is good for nothing. Jesus says if you take away our influence, nothing of value remains. That’s how important our godly influence is in our culture. People want to add policies and programs to get society to change because it doesn’t want or doesn’t want to admit that the remedy is found in Christ who brings about a changed heart. If we are going to be a preservative and add flavor to our culture, we need to get out of the salt shaker.

Nineteenth century pastor Alexander MacLaren wrote **“Human society, without my influence, is a carcass that is rotting away, and disintegrating. You are to be rubbed into that rotting mass to arrest decomposition, to stay corruption, to give flavor, to save it from falling to pieces of its own wickedness.”**

We are to be salt.

We are also to be light.

#### B. Be Light

**Do you understand that Jesus calls us the same thing He called Himself?**

In **John 8:12** He said that He was the light of the world.

In **Matthew 5:14** Jesus said we are the light of the world. We are His lights.

The basic function of light is to dispel darkness.

**What’s the first thing we do when we walk into a dark room?** We turn on the light so we can see. We want to know where we are going. We want to know what to avoid.

Jesus says we are not to hide our light, but instead we are to let it shine. Like a city that sits on top of a hill is visible for miles around, so we are to stand out and be visible for others to see.

Tony Evans writes **“to hide a light is contradictory**

to its purpose.”

Jesus also says that we are not to limit our light, but instead we are to be like a light that is put on a lampstand. The value of light isn't when it's added to other lights. The value is when it is put in a dark room. Don't just hold up a **John 3:16** sign, be the sign. Live out your faith with godliness.

No one ever said at a meal “My, that was delicious salt.” Instead, they complemented on the flavor of the food.

No one ever commented on the shape of a lightbulb or how nicely curled the filaments inside are. Instead, our attention is drawn to what the light reveals around us. It serves to point to other things.

We have a painting that belonged to Robyn's dad. At the top is a light. When the light is on, it doesn't point to itself, it points to the painting.

Light doesn't draw attention to itself. Jesus said that as a light to the world, our good works, our deeds, our character will point people to God.

In preparing for the message this past week, an unlikely song came to mind. Its lyrics point to the sad state of our culture and the need of our influence.

A long, long time ago  
 I can still remember how that music  
 Used to make me smile  
 And I knew if I had my chance  
 That I could make those people dance  
 And maybe they'd be happy for a while  
 But February made me shiver  
 With every paper I'd deliver  
 Bad news on the doorstep  
 I couldn't take one more step  
 I can't remember if I cried  
 When I read about his widowed bride  
 Something touched me deep inside  
 The day the music died  
 So, bye-bye, Miss American Pie  
 Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry  
 And them good ol' boys were drinkin' whiskey and  
 rye  
 Singin', "This'll be the day that I die  
 This'll be the day that I die"

In a culture filled with despair, we are commanded to be salt and light, to offer hope through how we live. Our good works show the evidence of our faith. H.A. Ironside reminds us that “**mere profession is not enough. The life should speak for God. As we live Christ before men, we let our light shine.**”

Alexander MacLaren says that “**you can bury the light of a holy character under a whole mountain of inconsistencies.**”

**Philippians 2:15 “be blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.”** In His absence, we are His lights.

John MacArthur says “**it is God's light; our choice is whether to hide it or let it shine.**”

Jesus said that if we are salt and light, our significance to culture would have the same impact that salt has on food and light has in revealing things otherwise dark and hidden.

**Has the salt of your testimony lost its flavor?  
 Has the light or your example dimmed because of  
 inconsistent character before a watching world?  
 What influence are we having on our culture?**

Our light should shine in a way that points people to Christ. In a way, we are the keeper of the spring. We have a command to be salt and light. It's a personal call because there is a pressing concern. Remember that “**God never calls us to action that He does not enable us to complete.**” (Alistair Begg)  
 Let's go be the salt of the earth.  
 Let's go be the light of the world.