

FROM BYSTANDING TO LIFE-CHANGING

Shift Series (Part 4) | Matthew 5:13-16

Standing By Amused

I read a book by media critic, Neil Postman, that was provocatively entitled, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In it, Postman writes this: *"When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when a people become an audience and their [political] business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture death is a clear possibility."*¹

I was chilled by this observation when I read it. I could see so many evidences of these trends in American life. I thought, we Christians better get more engaged. We need to model a different kind of life and use our voices to spark a better kind of discourse. If a lot of us don't act, it's only going to get worse. But you know something even more chilling? The year I read that book was 1985. In the time since then, how much more has our society come to fit the description made by that author? English journalist and novelist *"Evelyn Waugh once remarked that the West is dying of sloth, not wrath. For the most part, institutions are lost, not because they are stormed by hostile outsiders, but because their custodians – overcome by apathy, diffidence, and intellectual fecklessness – simply give them away."*²

It is easy, without meaning to, to become mainly a BYSTANDER in life. Do you know what I mean by that? So much is swirling and sizzling around us that it becomes tempting to just stand and watch. So much is wrong about what other people are doing that it is natural to simply sit and critique. Even if we see a need, there always seem to be others who might be better at filling it or who already seem to be filling it. Some say about our church: "I love this place. I can come, drink coffee, eat snacks, enjoy the services, and it's just provided for me!" Meaning, other people put it on and pay for it.

This, of course, is not a great way of living. It does not bring forth the best in us or unleash the capacities that could solve a lot of problems in our culture, or circles, or church. Which is why, no doubt, Jesus calls us make one more purposeful SHIFT. If you are really one of my disciples, then, shift **from bystanding to changemaking**. Get out of the spectator seats and onto the field of play, he says. And to make his point vivid, Christ describes this role in deceptively simple but profoundly powerful terms: **"You are the salt of the earth... [and] the light of the world" (Matt 5:13-14)** Now, I know that most of us have heard that pair of metaphors for the Christian life many times. But what is it about the salt a Jewish mother used in her kitchen or the lamp that a Hebrew father lit each evening that suggests the SHIFT toward the role that you and I are meant to play in the world?

Disciples are to Present a Difference

Well, one thing you can certainly say about [salt and light](#) is that they [are distinct from their surroundings](#). If you were to go to a farmer's market -- the same sort of market that has been around since the time of Jesus -- you could buy lots of food. And yet little or none of it would be salty. Most of it would be rather bland. Similarly, if you traveled across the vast reaches of space, you would discover that very little of it is light. Most of it is darkness. Salt exists in marked contrast to the blandness of most food. Light exists in marked contrast to the darkness of most of the universe. And, if you are truly following me, Jesus is saying, you will be distinct from those who are not.

In his book, *Run With the Horses*, author Eugene Peterson suggested that the world today has come to embrace a way of living that is bland or dark or both. *"The puzzle,"* he writes, *"is why so many people live so badly. Not so wickedly, but so inanely. Not so cruelly, but so stupidly... We have celebrities but not saints. Famous entertainers amuse a nation of bored insomniacs. Infamous criminals act out the aggressions of timid conformists. Petulant and spoiled athletes play games vicariously for lazy and apathetic spectators. Aimless and bored, people amuse themselves with trivia and trash."*

Now that characterization of our society is overly harsh, but my point is that if we are citizens of the City of God, our character and conduct will be very different from that. To come across a group of my followers, says Jesus, ought to be like the experience many in the ancient world actually had. They'd be traveling through some dark, dangerous badland. They'd be hungry, thirsty and tired. All of a sudden, they'd come around a bend and there it was -- a city on a hill -- a place of light and warmth and safety and sustenance ([Matt 5:14](#)). Their hearts would soar and they'd pick up their pace and make for that city. Jesus is saying, My church ought to be a destination like that -- a place of light and hope that stands out against the darkening sky.

Is that true of us? Is walking into this community a breathtakingly positive experience for others because you've helped create that environment? If someone followed YOU with a camera this week, would the video go viral because it was so amazing the way you handled yourself when someone hurt or dissed you... because it was so inspiring the way you shared from your resources with those in need... because it was so unusual the way you dealt with that seductive temptation or that moment when you could have taken all the credit but gave the blessing to others and the glory to God?

If you read on through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount in which today's teaching is lodged, you'll be struck by the recurrent refrain of Jesus. **"You have heard it said... but I say to you..."** "I know you've heard that life is supposed to work like this... I know you've been told that goodness or success or satisfaction looks like this... But I say to you, live like this." **Resolve that you are going to be as distinct from the ordinary standard as salt is from bland and light is from darkness.**

Preserve Your Distinctiveness

But as you make that SHIFT, please remember that salt and light can be compromised. In this brief teaching from Matthew 5, Jesus identifies two ways that can happen. For one thing, you can lose your saltiness. Think about this. Have you ever left a saltshaker on a shelf so long that the salt actually lost its saltiness? You put it on your food and it was bland. No you haven't! That has never happened to you! The kind of salt we use today can't lose its saltiness. Our house salt is pure sodium chloride, a very stable compound.

In the ancient world, however, common house salt was gotten from the evaporation of salt marshes. The stuff that was left behind was a mixture of sodium chloride and all kinds of impurities like gypsum, natron, and sodium sulphate. Over time, the sodium chloride could be leached out, leaving behind only the impurities. It would still look like salt but with none of the beneficial effects. Once that happened, it was good for little else than to be thrown out. Because every resource was used carefully in the ancient world, people typically threw the leached salt onto the flat roofs of their homes and stomped it into the cracks. The remaining gypsum, natron, and sulphate made a pretty good sealant that kept water from seeping into the house. (Matt 5:13b). Do you see now what Jesus was saying here about the salt only being good for trampling?

Jesus is acknowledging that most of us are not pure compounds. If we're not careful, our Christian commitment and character can be leached away. Eventually, we'll only appear to be Christian, but no longer function as salt in the world. The hypocrisy or emptiness of such Christians can actually seal people against the water of God's Spirit, like those hardened roofs Christ's poetic image describes. This is why it is so crucial that you and I keep engaging in the soul-training practices and the equipping classes and the small group partnerships by which God keeps replenishing our saltiness. What do you do between weekends, to let God renew your distinctive character?

Penetrate Your Environment

If salt and light are really to do the good for which they were created, it will be because they are not simply different from what surrounds them: it will be because they also penetrate their environment. When Jesus was a child, he would have been accustomed to watching his mother take a handful of salt and rub it into meat or fish in order to preserve it against decay in the sweltering heat. Sometimes she might even soak the food in salty water for, in order for the salt to do any good, it had to really penetrate the food through and through.

Jesus intends for his followers to penetrate and benefit our environment. It's easy to forget that. Sometimes we think, "I'm different because I go to church." We slip into

thinking that what God really wants is for us to come and exercise our difference here on weekends. Here we will be forgiving. Here we will give credit to God for our blessings. Here we will speak of truth and grace. Here we will live like Jesus. But we haven't been created for IN HERE any more than salt is created for the saltshaker or light is made to be left underneath a building size bowl.

Don't get me wrong. It's OK that we come here to the Christian Bowl once a week. Please don't stop coming. It's good to have a place where the flame of faith is protected against the winds of the world and has a chance to heat up. But Jesus says that the primary function of the flame isn't to warm the bowl; it is to penetrate every corner of the world and give light to everyone (Matt 5:15).

Sometimes I hear people evaluating their Christian experience in terms of what the pastor did here on Sunday. I think God evaluates it by what you do out there on Monday. In the words of John Stott, the ultimate question of our day is: *"Will Christian men and women be able so to influence their society so that the values and standards of Jesus permeate American culture, its legislation and institutions, its administration of justice, its conduct of business, the education of its children and young people, its care of the sick and elderly, its attitude to dissidents and criminals, and the way of life of its citizens?"*³

There's something that the syntax of the original Greek version of this text makes clear that gets lost in translation. The emphasis of Jesus' statements here is not on the words "salt" and "light." It's on the FIRST word of each sentence. Christ's emphasis is on "YOU." **"YOU are the salt of the earth..."** says Jesus. **"YOU are the light of the world."** It won't be ME who wakes one of your friends from their spiritual slumber. It won't be the pastor of your church who challenges wrong in your workplace, who maintains a vision for the highest in your home, who speaks of the hope of Christ to that person at your kid's game or your coffee shop. IT WILL BE YOU.

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Which brings us to the final meaning of this brilliant metaphor Jesus gives us to explain the role of Christians in the world. Jesus has called us to be ATTRACTIVE WITNESSES to the difference it makes to have God and not some lesser thing as Lord of our lives. He has left us in this world, secondly, not that we might live privately pious lives, but that we might penetrate our environments for the sake of His kingdom. And, finally, **salt and light bring about change.** God has put you and me where we are so that we might bring about a change.

You know there's a funny thing about salt. All it takes is a pinch, and wow, how things change. What was once bland becomes delightful. What was once subject to rot and decay is now preserved. The same is true of light. Just strike a tiny match, even in the midst of a big dark room, and watch how the environment changes. In an interview in

Psychology Today, renowned sociologist, Robert Bellah, said: *"We should not underestimate the significance of [a] small group of people who have a new vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a culture may be changed when [just] two percent of its people have a new vision."*

Have that new vision, says Jesus. When you open ourselves up to being channels of my Father's salt for this earth, you don't become mere saltshakers; you become conduits for a taste-giving and decay-stopping force the size of the world's oceans and more. When you open yourself up to being bearers of my Father's light, you aren't simply drawing on the flame of a single match; you become a lamp through which can shine the light of the God of a billion suns.

If you ever doubt this, remember the indisputable truth about which historian, Kenneth Latourette, writes as follows: *"No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of humanity as that of [Jesus] Christ... Through it, millions of people have had their inner conflicts resolved. Through it, hundreds of millions have been lifted from illiteracy and ignorance and have been placed upon the road of growing intellectual freedom and control over the physical environment. [The life of Jesus] has done more to allay the physical ills of disease and famine than any other impulse, and it has emancipated millions from chattel slavery and millions of other from thralldom to vice. It has protected tens of millions from exploitation by their fellows and has been the most fruitful source of movements to lessen the horrors of war and to put the relations of men and nations on the basis of justice and peace."*

That's what ONE solitary life can do. What could that life do through us if all of us decided we are really going to live like Jesus? If we decided to move from dabbling to discipleship, from securing self to seeking the good of others, from demanding justice to extending mercy, from bystanding to changemaking. Make no mistake, this IS Christ's plan. Jesus says: *You are the salt, the light, the seed, the yeast I am putting out there.* So speak up clearly. Serve practically. Give generously. Reach out daringly. Do not wait FOR the solution. BE the solution. In the name of Jesus, I say, SHIFT!

¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, pp. 155-56

² Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, p.12

³ John Stott, "Christians: Salt and Light," *Preaching Today*, #109. NOTE: I am indebted throughout this message for the insight of both John Stott and Howard Hendricks on this passage of scripture.