

# COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

## Matthew 5:13-16

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

### Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

## Matthew 5:13-16 - THE CALL TO INFLUENCE

### *Salt and Light*

13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

### **The church exists to slow down or arrest society's decay.**

- "You are the salt of the earth." Jesus is speaking to his disciples, and to his disciples alone. The word "you" is emphatic, so it's as though Jesus is saying, "You – and you alone – are the salt of the earth." By "earth" he means all the people of the world, as well as all possible spheres of life and society. In those days salt was used primarily as a preservative – to prevent decay. Jesus is implying that all the spheres of life and society are in the process of decay. Society is in a state of social, spiritual and moral decay. Yet Jesus tells this small group of disciples, which would eventually grow into a very large group, that their function is to slow down or arrest the decay in society.
- Jesus calls us to be people of influence. Although the rest of the Bible speaks of the two God-ordained institutions of government and family (which serve as deterrents to decay), here Jesus is emphatic that it is mainly the church that has the role of arresting moral, spiritual and social decay. Salt exists to be given away. Similarly, as Christians we have a God-given responsibility to live out our faith in the world. We exist to benefit, to bless and to serve society.
- Evil prospers when good people say nothing, do nothing. The desperate need in the world is for Christians who are experiencing the transforming grace of God in their lives, to become agents of transformation in the world. We're not called to be sweet. We don't sugar-coat the evil of society. We're called to be salt. We courageously, consistently and creatively need to seek to bring about change for good. Through our

examples, our prayers, our action, our writings, our presentations, our conversations, our protests, our initiatives, our advocacy, and our creativity we can resist that which is false, corrupt and unjust, and rather promote that which is “good, true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy” (see Philippians 4:8).

- Obviously, the single most important and effective way to impact people and society for good is to lead people to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel and through discipleship in the local church, but this is not the only way to make an impact for good.

### **The church must make contact, and yet maintain contrast.**

- “But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” Salt only influences food when it: makes contact with food (is used to preserve and season food), and maintains its contrast to the rest of the food. Let’s look at these two thoughts separately.
- *As salt we need to make contact.* The life of a disciple of Jesus must be lived out in public. We are not to retreat into monasteries and endless church activities that seclude us from the world in an effort to preserve us from society’s influence. After all, Jesus never came to take his disciples out of the world, but to take the world out of the disciples. Jesus puts great confidence in our ability to maintain distinctness even while we get involved in relationships with non-Christians, as well as penetrate and participate in all aspects of society – sport, arts, media, government, business, family, social justice movements, developmental agencies, property, health and more. If we fail to get involved, we fail to influence.
- *As salt we need to maintain a contrast.* What does Jesus mean by “the salt losing its saltiness”? He’s referring to the shocking possibility that disciples of Jesus can lose their distinctness from the world around them. Our capacity to influence for good is found not in our conformity to the world’s values and beliefs, but our contrast to the world’s values and beliefs. We are to ensure that we are different, that we are a counter-culture, an outpost of Christ’s heavenly kingdom wherever we find ourselves. If we compromise and conform to society we lose our capacity to influence it and our lives are wasted. Instead of influencing society for good, we get trampled into the ground in total insignificance.

<p>14 “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.</p>
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### **The church exists to reveal who God really is to the world.**

- “You are the light of the world.” The word “you” is emphatic, so it’s as though Jesus is saying, “You – and you alone – are the light of the world.” Elsewhere, Jesus made it clear that he himself was the “light of

the world” and that as we trust in him we “have the light” (John 8:12). What is this light? It is the God-given revelation of who God really is, and how he has revealed himself supremely in Jesus Christ. “The world” is parallel to “the earth” (v13) and refers to all the people of the world, as well as all possible spheres of life and society. Jesus is saying that it’s our job as the church to reveal to all people everywhere who God really is, and how he has revealed himself supremely in Jesus Christ. This “light” will impact not only people, but also culture (i.e. the spheres of life and society).

- So many people are, and so much of culture is, in the dark about who God really is, especially about his self-revelation in Jesus. People may be highly educated but clueless about this reality. As long as darkness prevails in the hearts of people and culture, life will be chaotic, disintegrated and warped. No amount of government or educational intervention will be able to bring the needed light.

#### **The church needs to boldly proclaim the gospel.**

- It’s not enough for the church to “have the light” (John 8:12). We need to “shine the light” (see Philippians 2:15 which calls us to shine like the stars in a warped and crooked world).
- “A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” Some cities exist in valleys and cannot be seen from a distance because they are hidden, while other cities are on hilltops and can be seen from far off. The church is a community that needs to position itself on the hilltop of openness and visibility, not in the valley of obscurity and invisibility.
- “Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.” What’s the point of putting a light under a bowl or bucket? Rather put it in a visible place where it can have its effect on its surroundings. The church is a community that needs to position itself on the lamp-stand of bold visibility rather than under the bowl of fearful secrecy.
- We’re called to be open and courageous in our faith in Jesus. We’re called to boldly proclaim the gospel message (see Acts 4:31). The world doesn’t understand that it’s under the wrath of God because of its sin. The world doesn’t understand that God loves it so much that he gave his one and only Son Jesus to die for it so that it can be forgiven and transformed by grace. The world doesn’t understand what God is like. But we do. And we must hold onto our faith convictions, and we must openly declare them in the hope that people will believe the gospel. Then they too will know what God is really like, how he has revealed himself in Jesus, and how he has sought to save and transform the world through Jesus.

#### **The church needs to actively and visibly demonstrate the character of God in the world.**

- Jesus wants us to live in such a way that the world “may see our good deeds and glorify (our) Father in heaven” (v16). It’s not enough to proclaim the gospel of who God really is. We need to demonstrate who God really is. We need to live out the gospel, not just preach it.

- We, the church, need to demonstrate God’s love for justice, his heart of humility, his compassion for the hurting, his longing for reconciliation, his passion for creativity and so much more.
- Perhaps the greatest block to our efforts to preach the gospel is that we as the church have not lived out the gospel consistently. If God is kind, then let us be kind. If God is merciful, then let us be merciful. If God hates injustice, then let us hate injustice. If God is compassionate, then let us be full of compassion. If God seeks to reconcile, then let us become peacemakers. If God is a humble servant, let us be humble servants. If God is creative, let us be creative.
- Francis of Assisi made a similar point when he said, “Preach the gospel and, if necessary, use words.” We can preach the gospel in our actions as we seek to help people, redeem culture, and overcome the things that devastate the lives of the poor. Having said that, we must not agree with Francis of Assisi entirely: it’s not enough to just live the gospel – we must preach it too!
- What will happen if we succeed in both living and preaching the gospel? Jesus tells us that people will “glorify your Father in heaven”. This suggests that they will recognize that we really are God’s people and this will draw people’s attention to our Father in heaven. Implied in this is that many people will be won over by the gospel, and will become worshippers of our Father, along with us.

*Sources used - Much reference will be made to these sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.*

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