

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

The Christian and Others

Matthew 5.1-16

2.6.22

When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,

³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

⁵ *"Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.*

⁶ *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

⁷ *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

⁸ *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

⁹ *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

¹⁰ *"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.¹² "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.*

¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

We're looking at the sermons and major speeches of Jesus Christ in the Four Gospels. It sometimes seems that SOME Christian Churches focus on the black letters and some on the red letters.

The Church has always taught and believed that all the letters are equally God's Word, not just what Jesus said...However, we may get so fixated on what Jesus Christ DID that we skip over what He said.

AND we've jumped into the deep-end, looking at the Big Speech of Jesus, The Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5-7) where, today, He speaks of His Church's INFLUENCE ON THE WORLD.

How will His followers interact with those who are NOT His followers? What effect will the Church of Jesus Christ have on society – how will that influence take place and how much influence will take place?

It'd be interesting to ask the average South Floridian that question: "Are you happy with how the Christian Churches in our area affect public opinion, public welfare, the quality of life here in South FL?"

OR the question might be asked, "Do you agree with the tactics and strategies local churches use in their attempts to change South Florida, to make our region a better place?"

And it might be interesting to ask YOU: ARE we having an impact? What kind of impact? How much influence ARE we having on our communities? Why don't we have more influence? A different type of influence? What ARE our hopes/goals for our culture and society? AND are we successful in our efforts?

Let's look at:

- 1. Symbols and Suppression**
- 2. Method in the Model**
- 3. Prescribing a Practice**

The symbols Jesus Christ uses to make His point are salt and light – "You are the SALT of the earth... You are the LIGHT of the world..."

And the suppression of these influences comes by either the salt losing its taste or flavor (lit $\mu\omega\rho\alpha\nu\theta\eta$ as in "moron" i.e. to become foolish) and the cancelation of light is by covering/hiding it.

But the point Jesus is making is the impossibility or the absurdity of the suppression. These symbols CAN NOT BE SUPPRESSED! Sodium Chloride can dissolve but it can't lose its flavor – it's absurd. AND no one in that place/time (before the light bulb) NO ONE in a situation where oil was expensive – NO ONE WOULD EVER light a lamp and then cover it. Everyone lights a lamp and then elevates it.

And we sense that Jesus Christ is indicting the corrupted clergymen of His day, "These guys have managed to do the impossible! They took the saltiness out of salt and hid an entire City on a Hill. The City of Jerusalem, the City on a Hill, is having no influence on the world – you hid a whole City!"

Salt and Light – the two metaphors are symbols of influence. Light stands for revelation, something that's concealed is now revealed by the light.

And salt has been seen as a flavor-enhancer or a preservative (like beef-jerky) I think those are good ways to think of salt as an influence... BUT salt was also an essential element in worship. The sacrifices had to be salted (Lev 2.13), "Every grain offering of yours... you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt."

Interesting that "salt of the covenant" would be mentioned... It's NOT often factored-in as we think about the reason Jesus Christ USED the image of salt but apart from negative uses for salt and geographical references (like a Salt Flat; Salt Sea) it's this worship and covenant idea that dominates the use of salt in the Hebrew Bible (Ex 30.35; Lev 2.13; Num 18.19; 2Kings 2.21; Ezk 43.24) I can't help thinking we may have missed something and that salt is used in worship, in sacrifices and covenants.

Is Jesus Christ saying that God's people, His Church is to be an influence on the world revealing the light of God's truth AND a reminder to the world that God has made a covenant with human beings – the salt of the covenant. It's not so much that the Church is preserving society or even flavoring it but that the very presence of the Church is seasoning the world as an offering to God (Rom 15.16; Col 4.6; Mark 9.50).

St Paul will later write, (Eph 3.10) "so that the multi-colored wisdom of God might now be revealed through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places."

In other words the Church, where wealthy people and poor, where Arabs and Jews, men and women, all various multicolored skin tones will all thrive in relationship and love one another BECAUSE of Jesus – when the spiritual powers SEE that – they will know that God has made a covenant with this planet and He is going to rescue it from hatred and evil!

Now, as the Church tries to figure out what it will look like for her to be salt and light, she's given a Model to follow – the Method in the Model of Jesus Christ. And it's for us to ask, "Did HE have any influence? Was it a good influence? AND how'd He do it?"

Well, He was the most influential Person who ever lived – indisputable. Christians believe, also, that His impact was overwhelmingly good and positive (even from a secular perspective – countless numbers of schools and hospitals, orphanages, feeding programs etc.) AND, last, how did HE do it? What was Jesus Christ's method in becoming the most influential Human to ever live on this planet? "

Well, as you know, He started a wildly successful letter-writing campaign against the "other" political party – millions of people sent letters to Rome and under that pressure, the Romans pulled out...

Of course I'm being facetious – the method He modeled that resulted in unique change for the good... His method for being salt and light was to serve. It was an underwhelming method with overwhelming results.

He said these words: "It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great (influential?) among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mat 20.26-28)

All power is HIS and YES! He wielded it to expel the people who tried to change the Temple – a house of prayer for all people – a fountainhead of grace and truth – and when they tried to turn it into a circus, a commercial enterprise opposed to God's covenant of grace – YES! Jesus turned over the tables and made a whip! But all that He did (even that!) was in one long act of service and self-sacrifice.

His disciples sometimes scolded Him for NOT using His power to advance His movement... He could've gotten a lot of help by pandering to the right people but that would be a self-repudiation and a betrayal of His own first principles... He's come to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.

His self-sacrifice enables His people to face their own inner poverty – that they're impoverished within (Rom 7.18). And Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who have NO CONFIDENCE in their own moral/spiritual abilities. Blessed are those who mourn their own sin and weakness and the evil of this fallen world... Blessed are those who, knowing God's gentleness and are then gentle to others." He serves. He does things and says things that COST Him and will eventually cost His life. He could've taken shortcuts but He was NO PRAGMATIST (Mat 4.8-10).

The Method He MODELED was just as important as the end He pursued. To influence society and make the world a better place – to win the whole world and forfeit His very self did not interest Him. It was as if He was saying, "If I can't save the world by love and self-sacrifice then the world will be lost. I WILL NOT save the world by using the world's strategies."

Now how are we to imitate Jesus Christ in this way of service? Well, here He tells us to do good deeds in order that people may see those deeds, THEN, in the very next chapter, He'll say, "do your good deeds in a way that no one will see you" (6.1) – HUH?

It's like in the Proverbs (26.4-5) where it says: "Don't answer a fool according to his folly" and the very next verse says, "Answer a fool according to his folly..."

In both places (where we're given these apparently contradictory commands) we're also given reasons to guide us but still: How do I know if I'm serving to be seen so that God gets the credit OR if I'm serving to be seen so that I get the credit?"

Well, this is the beauty of the Sermon on the Mount – as we saw last week: the most important phrase in the whole sermon (at least for the doing of it) is the five-word-phrase at the end of v. 1: "His disciples came to Him."

We can only DO the Sermon on the Mount as we begin and then continue to come to and to rely on Jesus Christ. This is the Declaration of Dependence. In this way of Life, depending on Jesus IS the Life.

Apart from Him we can do nothing (John 15.5) He IS the Light and He IS the Salt of the Covenant – He makes the sacrifices acceptable and He is the Sign of the Covenant – His resurrection screams to us that His sacrifice is acceptable the agreement with God is fulfilled and that all who trust Him are forgiven.

The PRACTICE THIS PRESCRIBES – the vocabulary I think we need comes from a book by James Davison Hunter (Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture and Social Theory at the University of Virginia). In his book called To Change the World, James Hunter calls the strategy we need: faithful presence.

It's an underwhelming strategy (that's why I like it because the Most Influential Man used it). In faithful presence, the church devotes itself first to one another. We serve one another. We consider the people in the pews, fellow members as being more important than we ourselves: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves..." (Phi 2.3)

Of course we have to be physically together to serve one another – so, to you still lingering at home... C O M E B A C K ... C O M E B A C K... life is passing!

To live as a city within the city with THESE values will change the world... Without this familial love FIRST for one another – the world won't listen to us.

Second, we look at our callings – if you're a dentist or a fitness instructor or a stay-at-home-dad or -mom or a salesperson or an accounts manager – you use your job to serve people. You do it deliberately and intentionally and when they ask "why?", you give God the credit: "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person." (Col 4.5-6)

AND whenever you get power – like over your server at a restaurant or someone you're paying to work at your apartment – use your power to serve. Treat people like you would Jesus Himself (Mat 25.31ff)

And...thē most important KEY: this is for the disciples of Jesus. If you're NOT one...don't wait any longer. Believe Him today. Actually speak with Him...resort to Him. Commit your past, present and future into His hands.

And if you ARE His disciple – “His disciples came to Him” – the most important phrase. If you think we can even love one another (never mind that terrible server at a restaurant or someone who hates YOU and lets you know it) – we can't even love one another without Jesus.

THIS STRATEGY DEPENDS ON Jesus – if I had to answer the question: “why isn't the American Church having a bigger influence on our society and culture?”... That would be my answer: we're not depending on Jesus.

But if we do... who knows what influence we might have?