

## Into the City:

As a Contrast Community (Matthew 5:13-16)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 27, 2015

### Introduction

- ❖ Today I'm concluding a mini-series on the ministry theme for our English congregation called "Into the City". We've been talking about becoming a church that's **for the city**, that goes **into the city**, that engages and serves our urban neighbors in practical ways, being witnesses to the city's lost, servants to its poor, and voices for its oppressed. That's what it means for a church like ours to embrace its calling, to be a church for the city. It won't be easy.
  
- ❖ **We have to work hard to resist the tendency to be a church against the city.** Where cultural disengagement, cultural separation begins to define us. Where we have no real connection with our neighbors, our community. There's a tendency to trend in that direction, especially for a traditionally immigrant church. Admittedly, we didn't choose to congregate in this location back in the early 80's with the intention of reaching the surrounding community. It was just a central location for a commuter church trying to reach the immigrant Chinese across the greater Houston area.
  - ▶ **But over the years, we've been moving with greater intentionality to reach and serve our neighbors.** But we still have a ways to go. We have to remain intentional because there's always the perception from within and without that a Chinese church is necessary against the city. Not in terms of being hostile towards the city or our urban neighbors – but definitely disengaged.
  
- ❖ Here's a good way to gauge where we're at. Think about this: **What if we were to suddenly pack up and move our location outside the city to one of the suburbs – would the city miss us?** Would our community miss us? Would our neighbors grieve our absence?
  - ▶ If they don't even notice we're gone, that means we're still disengaged. We're still more *against* than *for* the city. We might be a church in the city but we haven't really gone into it.
  
- ❖ So we've got work to do. We've got to be intentional to not be perceived internally and externally as a church against the city. **But at the same time, we don't want to swing the pendulum so far that we become a church of the city.**
  - ▶ Churches of the city won't be accused of disengaging, but they're guilty of over-adapting or over-contextualizing. They uncritically embrace the dominant culture to the point that they lose their distinctive Christian identity. Their worldview and values, their convictions and practices are totally of the city, of the world. These churches have forsaken their unique calling to be the salt and light of God sent into the city, into its culture.
  
- ❖ No one said it's easy. **It's not easy navigating that line between being in the world but not of the world** (Jn. 17:16, 18). But that's the job of salt and light. That's what we're called to do as disciples.
  - ▶ **We're to go into the city for the good of the city, but we're no good to the city (no good for anything) if we conform, if we don't stand out.** Salt only works if it stands out, if it has a distinct taste, if it's salty. Otherwise it's useless (Lk. 14:34-35). Light is only effective if it contrasts with darkness. If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Mt. 6:23)
    - **So the vision is for us to go into the city – but not just as individual Christians. The vision is to do this together as a church, as a community – as a contrast community in but not of the city.**

- ❖ If we want to make a real difference, if we want to advance the good of our neighbors, then we have to realize that serving as isolated, individual Christians is not God's plan. One grain of salt is salty but no one uses it by itself. **One grain of salt won't preserve the meat. It won't season the meal. You need a whole handful. That's what a church is in the hands of God.**
  - ▶ Together as a contrast community, as a body of believers living out who we are in Christ, the goal is to make a positive impact in our city and offer a compelling, attractive witness to the person of Christ and to his earthly body, the Church.
    - This morning's text is out of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his teaching on being salt and light in the world. We can break it down into three parts. 1) Jesus describes the state of the world without the grace of God. 2) He explains the nature of a Christian because of the grace of God. 3) He spells out the role of a church in extending the grace of God.

### The State of the World

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the state of the world. I realize Jesus' emphasis is on his disciples who are sent into the world, but it's important we understand the situation we're being called into. So think about it: **If disciples are salt of the earth, then by implication what's going on with the earth? It's in decay.** That's what Jesus is implying. The world, apart from the grace of God, is rotting.
  - ▶ In antiquity, there were no refrigerators or deep freezers, so to preserve meat, to slow the rate of decay, you rub salt into it. That's the imagery Jesus is getting at. So by calling Christians salt of the earth, he's saying the earth – not the physical earth but unregenerate society, the world outside of Christ – is in **slow moral decay**. It's rotting in a social and spiritual sense.
    - The second metaphor of Christians being the light of the world essentially communicates the same point. The world is a dark place. Throughout the Bible, light is used figuratively to symbolize **purity** in contrast to filth, **truth** in contrast to error, **knowledge** in contrast to ignorance, **the presence of God** in contrast to his absence. So again the implication is that the unregenerate world, apart from the grace of God, is filled with filth, error, and ignorance and is absent of God.
- ❖ That's the state of the world. **This fallen world. This Genesis 3 world we live in. It's not good.** And I seriously wonder if anyone nowadays would disagree with Jesus. Perhaps at the turn of the twentieth century, there were many who would. They would've argued that the world is growing more enlightened. We're advancing in technology, in medicine, in food production, in harnessing energy in natural resources. Pretty soon we're going to solve world hunger, eradicate all diseases, lift people out of abject poverty. We're building a better world, a utopia of sorts.
  - ▶ But then after two bloody World Wars, after the promise of nuclear energy brought the threat of nuclear annihilation, after untold number of mass genocides and mass shootings, after terrorists brought down skyscrapers and beheaded innocents on camera – I think most people would agree with Jesus. **The world is a pretty rotten place.**
- ❖ **And yet we must realize that the current state of the world is not the state in which it was created. And it's not the state in which God intends to leave it.** God made the world and it was very good. But the Fall of Man produced a fallen world, under the curse of sin, subject to decay.

- ▶ As a holy God, perfectly holy in justice, he could've walked away. He should've withdrew his grace and left the world to self-destruct. But as a holy God, perfectly holy in love, he did the exact opposite. He drew near. **He stepped into this dark, rotting world in the person of Jesus Christ – the true salt and true light who came to save the world from itself.**
- ❖ Jesus is God's answer to a dark and rotting world. If you recall, Jesus called himself the light of the world (Jn. 8:12). He shone his light in the darkness and exposed the sin and depravity within society and within our own souls.
  - ▶ And he's the salt of the earth that was rubbed into this world until his body was battered and bruised. But in giving up his body in death, he brought life. He brought hope. **Yes, this world may be going in the wrong direction now, but it will not always be so.**
- ❖ There's this scene from the *Lord of the Rings*, in the book, when Frodo and Samwise Gamgee are on the final leg of their journey. They're in the heart of Mordor, a dismal, dreadful, dark land. Everything seems stacked against them. Any hope of getting that ring to Mount Doom is fading fast. Night is upon them and Sam encourages Frodo to get some sleep while he takes first watch. There in heart of darkness, in the depths of despair, Sam suddenly sees a white star in the sky.
  - ▶ Listen to this, "*There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.*" After that it says Sam put his fears aside, crawled up next to Frodo, and "*cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep*".
- ❖ It was just a single white star, but it shone through all the darkness, all the shadows, and cast away all fear and in its place gave hope. That's what light does. That's what the light of the world does. **Jesus gives hope that the current state of the world will not always be so.** He's the bright morning star that soon will dawn. And when it does sin's curse will be reversed. Everything will be restored to the way it was. Everything wrong will be righted. Everything sad will come untrue.
  - ▶ Even with all the craziness going on in the world today, you and I can enjoy "*deep untroubled sleep*" because the Morning Star is on the horizon. The dawning of that day is fixed in God's sovereign will and timing. Jesus will return – of that we're sure.

### **The Nature of a Christian**

- ❖ But what about now? What about until that day arrives? Is all hope deferred till the future? Is there any hope for the present? Yes, there is. In fact, we mustn't forget that this world is not as bad as it could possibly be. It's not as sinful or rotten as it could possibly be. **The world is rotting but it's not completely rotted. The world is dark but it's not pitch black.**
  - ▶ The reason is grace – God's common grace. By it the Lord has placed restraining influences in this world to slow the rate of decay, to keep this world from being as bad as it could possibly be. **The state and the family**, for example. These institutions have delegated authority from God to punish evil and curb the destructive tendencies within man. **But the most powerful of all restraints are Christians.**

- ❖ That's what Jesus meant in v13 by calling his disciples the salt of the earth. That leads to our second point. We just considered the state of the world apart from grace. **Now let's look at the nature of Christians because of grace.** It's true that Jesus is saying his disciples have a tremendous amount of influence in this world. **We are a powerful restraining force against evil and moral decay.**
- ❖ But there are two things to make clear. **First, Christians may be the salt of the earth, but they're nothing special in themselves.** It's important to remember who Jesus was talking to that day. We get a good idea at the end of chapter 4:24, "*The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them.*"
  - ▶ So the sick, the suffering, the emotionally unstable, the weak are all flocking to Jesus. I'm sure that included the poor and oppressed. And then starting in chapter 5 we get the greatest sermon preached. Which was not delivered in a fancy sanctuary or on a stage at a big conference. **The greatest sermon ever preached was delivered on the side of a grassy hill spoken to the have-nots, can-nots, and even the will-nots of society.** It was delivered to those at the bottom of the religious barrel.
- ❖ **It's important to understand that the Beatitudes in vv2-12 are not a checklist of things to work on before you can become a disciple of Jesus.** It was a description of the people there on the hillside. And let's be honest. If you saw the crowd that day you'd be confused. *How are these people going to impact the world? What kind of influence could they possibly have?*
  - ▶ But Jesus said it and he meant what he said. When he said you're the salt of the earth, the light of the world, he was talking to the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the persecuted, the reviled, etc. These are his disciples. They're nothing special in themselves.
- ❖ Here's the second thing to clarify: **Christians are nothing special in themselves but they are something distinctive in Christ.** We're only the salt of the earth because he first rubbed his salt in us. We're the light of the world because he first filled us with his light.
  - ▶ Did you notice how Christians are described as lamps in v15? **Lamps, in those days, were really just lampstands that held up the candles, which were the actual source of light.** So the light doesn't even come from us. We're just holding up the light for all to see.
    - Or think about the moon. **Christians are like the moon.** We illuminate the night sky. Without the moon, the evening would lead to utter darkness. But the moon has no light source. It just reflects the light of the sun. That's the same for a Christian. **I'm only a light to this world if I'm reflecting the true light of the world.**
- ❖ The point of stressing this is to humble you. Because to have someone call you "the light of the world" can go to your head. It makes you feel so important, so powerful, so influential. And you are! But it's not you. It's Christ in you – Christ reflected in you. **So yes, you are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, but don't let it go to your head.**

- ❖ Let it go instead to your heart and move you to love the world as God loves it. The reason he leaves us on earth – instead of rapturing us away the minute we’re saved – is because God loves the world. **So he salts the earth with Christians, that we might slow the rate of decay.**
  - ▶ But to make any difference we have to be rubbed in deep. If you want to preserve a slab of meat, you can’t just sprinkle salt on top of it. You have to rub it in. The salt has to penetrate deep in the meat if you want to make a difference.
  
- ❖ But that’s our problem. **As Christians, our engagement with the world is often superficial.** We’re just sprinkled in the world while at work or at school. But then we quickly return to our Christian enclaves where we feel more at home. We’re not deeply engaged in the culture. We’re not rubbed in.
  - ▶ So if the culture is going sour, if the world is rotting, who should we blame? It shouldn’t be the culture. Don’t blame the world. **It makes no sense to blame unsalted meat for going bad. The question is where’s the salt?** Where’s the salt? Where are the Christians?
    - This is what Jesus is getting at when he warns against losing our saltiness or against hiding our light under a bushel. There’s definitely the possibility, the tendency, to lose our saltiness. To hide our light.
  
- ❖ Let me ask you: ***Are you rubbed into the world, into your workplace, your campus, your neighborhood? Or are you just lightly sprinkled on?*** Let’s stop pointing fingers at who’s to blame for all the problems in society, for the breakdown of the family, for structural injustices. Instead, let’s get into the city. Let’s deeply engage our neighbors and colleagues, the city’s poor and needy, its overlooked and oppressed. Don’t keep the city at a safe arm’s length. Get rubbed in.
  - ▶ And then just be a Christian. Be who you are in Christ. **Be salt and by your very presence you’ll function as a preservative and a seasoning. You’ll prevent decay, and you’ll bring out taste and goodness.**
  
- ❖ So a Christian, by her very presence in the workplace, preserves the place from greater corruption. Her presence reveals the dishonesty in business practices, the gossip in the office, the greed and the promiscuity in hearts. She doesn’t have to say anything. Just by being present, being salt, doing her work as a Christian, deeply engaging coworkers and customers as a Christian, she makes sin look like sin and righteousness look attractive.
  - ▶ And all of this is before she speaks a word about her faith. This is before she shines light – the light of the gospel – to her coworkers. I think Jesus had a good point by mentioning being salt before being light. **In other words, our lives should speak first before our mouths.**
  
- ❖ Problems come when you try to shine light with your words but your life has no distinctiveness. It doesn’t stand out and taste any different than the rest of the world. So your words fall on deaf ears. **Your light, in fact, is still hidden, covered by your own indistinctive life.**
  - ▶ We have to first be salt, be salty Christians. To stand out in a good way. So that even if you’re slandered for being a Christian, “*those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame*”, as Peter puts it in 1 Peter 3:16. **If you’re salty, then when you open your mouth to speak truth, to shine the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, people can’t deny it.** They can’t deny the beauty of the light.

## The Role of the Church

- ❖ But as we said earlier, one grain of salt – even if its deeply rubbed in – is not enough. It won't get the job done. You need a whole handful. All of us, as a church, must be salt and be light together. This lead to our third point: **The role of the church in extending the grace of God.**
  
- ❖ I mentioned earlier this idea of members in a church living life together as a contrast community. I think that's what Jesus is getting at when he spoke about of a city on a hill. You can't miss it. You can't help but see it. If you were a lost traveler wandering about the countryside, weary and tired, in the middle of the night. A brightly-lit city set on a hill would be the most welcomed of sights.
  - ▶ **That's what we want our church to be. To be this beacon of light that draws in the lost, so they can come and find rescue and rest in our Lord Jesus Christ.** The goal is for our communal life together to be compellingly attractive. We want to the way we love and serve each other to draw people to the body of Christ and to the Head Himself.
    - **But Jesus is teaching that an attractive community, a compelling community, needs to be a contrast community.** And that will mean three things.
  
- ❖ **First, a contrast community is not going to cater to please.** That's what society expects us to do. To be polite and not ruffle any feathers. But a contrast community is going to contrast and not conform. We can't cater to mere politeness.
  - ▶ Churches these days are struggling with this. Our views and values no longer align with the majority culture around us. We're the minority holding minority views. So there's a strong temptation among churches to avoid confronting societal ills. To not speak publicly on controversial culture issues. Because we don't want to upset anyone.
    - As one commentator put it so well, ***"To look at some Christians one would think that their ambition is to be the honeypot of the world. They sweeten and sugar the bitterness of life with an all too easy conception of a loving God . . . But Jesus, of course, did not say, "You are the honey of the world." He said, "You are the salt of the earth." Salt bites, and the unadulterated message of the judgment and grace of God has always been a biting thing."***<sup>1</sup>
      - I realize that lately our church has been addressing some touchy social issues here in service and Sunday School. It's not because we want to be controversial. It's because that's what salt does. We're being salt.
  
- ❖ **Second, a contrast community is not going to exist to simply serve itself.** That's what most organizations are here to do. They exist to serve their own members. But as William Temple famously said, *"The church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of non-members."* We exist to make disciples among all nations not just among our children, not just among our people.
  - ▶ That's the very nature of salt and light. They're intended for use. They're meant to benefit others. If you hide light under a basket, you've defeated the purpose. It exists to serve and benefit others and not itself.

---

<sup>1</sup> Helmut Thielicke, cited in John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, pg. 66.

- ❖ What will that look like for a church? **It means constantly evaluating our ministries.** Who is it that we're serving? Who is it that's being blessed? Is it just us? What about the city? What about its poor, its oppressed, its hungry, its outcasts?
  - ▶ Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying a church shouldn't have ministries geared primarily towards its members or Christians in particular. **Galatians 6:10** commands us to do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. **1 Timothy 5:8** warns if anyone does not provide for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Because non-Christians take care of their own. **So if we're overlooking needs within our church, our own household, then we're failing as salt and light.**
    - So yes there's a place for ministries geared towards members, towards Christians. Your small group would be the best example. **But the point of loving and serving and caring for one another is so that we can show the inhabitants of our city a compelling contrast.** To show there's another way to live, another way to love, and other way to serve and give. And they'll notice. Like a city on a hill they can't miss it.
  
- ❖ The early church really nailed it. **They were the epitome of a contrast community that lived life together is a compelling way.** Listen to what an Athenian philosopher once wrote to the Roman emperor Hadrian (ca. AD 125) about the Christians in Athens. *"They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and deliver the orphans from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, give to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; . . . And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them."*<sup>2</sup>
  
- ❖ *Wouldn't that be something if one day our neighbors are describing us this way?* If they've taken note of the way we love one another, as well as the way we love the poor, the oppressed, the captives, etc. If they can see and affirm the good we're doing in our city. That would be amazing.
  
- ❖ But here's the last thing to say about being contrast community: **Even though we want to be noticed by our city, we're not going to make a name for ourselves.** We just want to work for the kingdom. We're not trying to build our own. Yes, we want to stand out. We want to be different. But only so God gets the glory. Like Jesus says in v16 we want to let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.
  - ▶ I want us to be known as a church for the city, a church that's deeply rubbed into our community. I want our neighbors to know us and miss us if we were ever gone. But God forbid if glory goes to us. God forbid people speak well of the body of Christ but continue to ignore and overlook our Head. We want them to see our good works and give glory to God.

---

<sup>2</sup> cited in Duane Litfin, *Word Versus Deed: Resetting the Scales to a Biblical Balance*, pg. 132-3.