

Sunday 14 June 2015
Otumoetai Baptist Church
Counter Cultural: Salt and Light

Enhance the lives of people, Illuminate God for people

(BLACK)

Several years back I was going through a bit of a rough patch. I was feeling a bit stressed, a bit overwhelmed with life, and I needed something to break the funk.

I had a good friend named Jono. Jono noticed that something wasn't quite right – I think me telling him gave it away! And so he decided to do something about it.

Jono said “meet me at the Mount, we're going walking!”

“Oh great”, I thought. Just what I feel like doing. Exercise!

Anyway I got to the mount and there's Jono. But he's not alone! He's got two golf clubs and some golf balls.

(SLIDE 1)

We walked up to the top of the mount, found a quiet place with no people around and then he gave me a short message, a little sermon if you like. He pulled out a black felt pen, gave it to me said, “Right, here's what you're gonna do. Whatever you're stressed about in life, write it on the golf ball – so write small! – and then place it on the tee.

Say a short prayer, grab the golf club, swing back and knock that ball, that stress, straight off the top of this mount!”

So I grabbed a ball, wrote something on it, took a swing, and ping! That ball blew off the top of the mount!

Then I grabbed another ball.

Now I should probably put a disclaimer here and say in no way am I advocating going up to the top of the mount and knocking golf balls off it! But I must say that it was fun, a good stress reliever and it helped me to get some things off my chest.

Jono's Sermon on the Mount worked!

And it kind of went against the culture of my time.

In fact it was counter cultural.

(SLIDE 2)

Rewind two thousand years and there was something else happening on a mountain. Another sermon! And this too was counter cultural!

See, Jesus had gathered his followers together on a mountain and he began teaching them about how they were to live and act as his disciples. True disciples.

And so now, I want you to picture that mount.

Maybe even Mount Maunganui.

(SLIDE 3)

Picture Jesus with his band of true disciples and he's sitting down on the grassy hill, stretching out his legs, clicking his neck, getting ready to send some pearls of wisdom their way.

His disciples are waiting. They've seen him teach and preach and heal. They know there's something different about him. Something counter cultural. He lives his life to a different beat. He talks about something called the Kingdom life.

And that's exactly where he starts his sermon on the mount. Going through what we know to be called the Beatitudes. Different qualities, or virtues, that would characterise what life looks like in this Kingdom of heaven that he talks about.

Last week Brian took us through the eight virtues, which I won't go through here, but do have a listen on our website if you missed it. Each virtue depicts a value in the kingdom and each comes with a challenge or question relating to that value.

So Jesus is setting the scene for what this kingdom life is all about. He's painting the picture. He's starting to talk about a life of faith in an upside down world.

And this life of faith was not something you qualify for by leading

an upright life and performing massive acts of service for mankind.

Instead this life of faith was lived out by those who are spiritually bankrupt, those who are filled with grief because of how sin has polluted this world, and thankfully those of us who struggle to handle all of what life throws at us.

So if you're living a life of faith in this upside down world and struggling with life at the moment, you're in good company right now.

Because Jesus says it's these people who belong to his Kingdom. The Kingdom of heaven. And in this Kingdom we are forgiven for all our mistakes and misdeeds, and one day all things will eventually be restored to how God originally created things.

But before this happens, Jesus' followers live here on earth. And Jesus gets this. Because he now directs his attention to how his followers should live in the here and now.

He uses two metaphors – two word pictures – to describe the role his followers will play during their 'stop-over' here on earth.

If you're a follower of Jesus, these two pictures tell you what you are here for.

They reveal the type of life that describes those of us who belong to Jesus, what impact we will have on a watching world, and our responsibility as we live in this world and await the coming Kingdom of heaven.

Let's read about these two things Jesus refers to in Matthew 5:13 – 16.

(SLIDE 4)

You are like salt for the whole human race. But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out and people trample on it.

You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house.

In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven.

Jesus says, "you are like salt for the whole human race."

(SLIDE 5)

My wife loves salt. So too does her family. No matter what they are eating, out comes the salt. It almost gets to the point that rather than saying 'would you like some salt with that?', I say 'would you like some food with that salt?' Just kidding, but they use salt on everything.

And that's always been strange to me, because I grew up in a

family where we didn't use salt on many foods at all. It wasn't that we didn't like salt, I think it was just because we thought the food was tasty enough without salt.

Maybe we were deprived.

Salt was a very common thing in Jesus' day, which you probably all know, but what you might not know is that it was also a very valuable substance.

Sometimes Roman soldiers would be paid in salt and if one of them was not doing his duties very well, it would be said that "he wasn't worth his salt."

Just like today, salt was used then to flavour food, to enhance the flavour, but it was also used to preserve food. There was no refrigeration back then, so for instance fish that were caught in the Sea of Galilee were packed in salt and sent to the markets in Jerusalem. The salt would keep the fish from spoiling.

This is the image that Jesus is using here to describe his followers. You are like salt for the whole human race. You enhance the flavour of life on earth and you help to preserve society; you keep it from spoiling.

So what it is it about one of Jesus' followers that makes life more flavoursome and pure? Well, as salt is naturally added to a meal

to enhance the taste, I believe it is the basic goodness that naturally comes out of a person which enhances the lives of others.

(SLIDE 6)

We can enhance the lives of people.

So how does this work? Well, if you're following Jesus by putting his words into practice in your life, then naturally you'll start to become like him. In basic terms you'll be a nice person, pleasant to be around, helpful, truthful, caring, loving and kind. Your life will be characterised by the presence of good deeds and the absence of vices or bad deeds.

Now this doesn't mean that we will never make mistakes or stuff up – all of us do! But I think it means that our lives will be greater characterised by the good that we do.

Please be careful here though. Jesus is not saying that if you work hard at becoming a good person then you are fit to be his disciple. He is turning this teaching – which was prominent at the time and still is today! The whole do good things to get into heaven – upside down! He is saying that if you have a place in the Kingdom (which only comes through God's grace) then you will become a really good person, in fact a **new** person, as you allow Christ's character to be formed in you.

We can see this in the lives of people around us.

As I was thinking about someone like this, a person who enhances the lives of others, my mind shot back to my old youth pastor in Auckland, a guy named Chad.

As the name suggests, he is an American. A very humble, laid-back guy, the kind of person who is quick to listen and slow to speak. But when he speaks, you know it's gonna be good and encouraging.

Chad was my pastor for a year and a half and I got to know him pretty well during this time and we became good friends. We'd often meet up for lunch – and he'd often pay!

During these times I'd have his total focus. He'd ask me how life's going, find out what I'm struggling with, what's going well, and most importantly he'd always bring the conversation back to God and what God was doing in my life.

In all the time I've known Chad, I've never known him to get angry at someone, or even raise his voice. He is always calm and collected. A real salt of the earth person.

And this is the type of person that I believe Jesus is talking about here. Chad was and is a real follower of Christ. Sure, I have no doubts that he wasn't perfect, but he tried his best and he always put others before himself.

And he enhanced other people's lives with the way he lived. Just by doing small things.

This works in the big things too, as the big picture of this kind of goodness has a massive effect on the world, the whole human race.

Salt-flavouring Christians have made this world a much better place to live in through their moral character and charitable works. Many of the world's hospitals, orphanages and universities were opened in the name of Christ.

Missionaries have brought literacy, medicine, education and practical training to millions of people.

As Jesus said, this kind of living is like salt for the whole human race.

Now of course Christians haven't always got it right. We probably all know that murder, theft and wars have been fought in the name of Christ too. People have acted in the name of Christ, but they did not obey the teachings of Christ.

Similarly, we may know people in our lives who claim to follow Christ, but their actions don't match up to their beliefs

Jesus addresses this issue in his next words:

(SLIDE 7)

But if salt loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It has become worthless, so it is thrown out and people trample on it.

Salt in his day was not the typical kind of pure salt that we have and enjoy today. It was mixed with impurities and if exposed to moisture for a long time, the salt could leach out, leaving only sand behind – in other words, it lost its salty characteristics.

When that happened the 'salt' became worthless. It no longer tasted any good. It no longer preserved anything. It was thrown out on the ground with the rest of the dust.

In other words, it has become tasteless trash now to be trampled on!

(SLIDE 8)

What a terrible picture to think about!

But that can happen to us too. If our goodness is tainted – if we stop doing good and instead let moral corruption rule our lives – then we too can stop being salty. We can stop having a purifying and enhancing effect on the world that Jesus intends for his followers to influence in a positive way.

As Jesus' disciples go out into the world as salt, to enhance the

lives of people, it is the nature of their lives that reveal whether they belong to him or not.

Let me assure you, true disciples cannot lose what has made them disciples, because they have been changed from the inside out. Sure, we'll still get things wrong. We'll still mess up. But we are being changed from the work of God in our lives.

Now imposter disciples, that's a different story. These are people who attempt to live their life with no real personal change from within, and their true nature will be revealed by their actions.

And Jesus is saying that they will not be made salty again, as they never had the type of saltiness that the kingdom life brings to start with.

This is a bit confusing I know, but what we should take home from Jesus' salt metaphor is that our lives in this world are important. We can either enhance people's lives. Or we can diminish their lives.

As The Message puts it, "You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth."

Jesus now turns his attention to his second word picture, light. You are like light for the whole world.

(SLIDE 9)

This is what the Message translation says:

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept.

We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!

(SLIDE 10)

Keep an open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

There was a flight from LA to New York and the American Airlines pilot came over the loudspeaker on the plane and asked all the Christians to raise their hands. Then he asked those who didn't raise their hands to use the four and a half hours flight time to talk with the Christian passengers about their relationship with God.

You can imagine in this post-9 11 super-sensitive security-conscious world what might have been going through some passengers' minds.

Although he denies it, some of the passengers claim the pilot said that anyone who wasn't a Christian was crazy.

One said this, "Just given the history of what's happened on

planes in this country, anything can happen at this point. So we weren't sure if something was going to happen at take-off, if he was going to wait until JFK to do something, but there was definitely the implication that we felt something was going to happen."

Nothing did happen.

But this perhaps illustrates a lack of forethought from the pilot, who I imagine afterwards was considering whether this was the best method to shine as a light in this world for Christ.

(SLIDE 11)

Jesus says his followers are like light for the whole world.

Light is used often in the Bible. It's often to contrast it with darkness, but it's also used to contrast knowledge and ignorance. In this context of Jesus speaking, it almost certainly stands for the world's opportunity to perceive the truth about Jesus and the hope that he offers.

The world is in the dark, if you like, about God, but Christians can "turn the lights on".

As light allows people to see, Christians allow the world to understand how much God loves them and what Jesus has done to make things right between them and their maker.

The light points to something greater than us.

As we are like salt for the whole human race in that we can enhance people's lives, I believe as light for the world that we can illuminate God for people.

(SLIDE 12)

We can point the way to Christ.

(SLIDE 13)

Next thing he says is, "A city on a hill cannot be hidden."

Just as Jesus says salt can lose its saltiness, in other words we become ineffective by letting moral decay into our lives, light too can become ineffective by being hidden. Hiding it defeats the purpose of light.

(SLIDE 14)

Jesus continues "No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead it is put on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house."

What Jesus is referring to here is the lamp in any typical Palestinian home back then.

(SLIDE 15)

It was a partially closed reservoir made of clay. It had a hole on top to pour the oil in and a spout on one end into which a wick of flax or cotton was set. It was a fairly small lamp, which gave off only a small amount of light; so to maximise the illumination it was placed on a lampstand.

Since many Jewish homes were often modest one room buildings, such an elevated lamp would give light to everyone in the household.

(SLIDE 16)

Jesus' disciples are called to be this kind of light to the whole world. They cannot be hidden, because their very nature, the kingdom life, is within them and their good works are produced by the light and life that comes from God.

But this is not so that we can receive the credit. We are not to live like the religious leaders of Jesus' time, who acted righteously to win the attention and praise of others. We are to live in such a way that people will see God in us and He will receive all the praise and glory.

We are to live as light-bearers for him.

A few weeks back I had the privilege of baptizing my mum. Mum wanted to do things a little different to show her public commitment to following Jesus. She wanted to get baptised at the hot pools.

So our family went to Baywave in the Mount, including my brother Luke and his wife and daughter who are here today, good to see you guys!, went into the wave pool, waited for the waves to finish(!) and then got ready to baptise her.

I asked her why she wanted to get baptised, and she answered that she wanted to show a public declaration of her internal faith. And to take a further step in her relationship with God.

Awesome answer, top of the class!

And so we baptised her, in front of all the other swimmers and spectators.

It wasn't to be showy, it wasn't to say look at me, it wasn't to feel good about herself. It was just a nice moment we got to share together where my mum got to be a public light-bearer for her true Father.

(SLIDE 17)

I've heard it described that these two metaphors Jesus uses of salt and light are all about expressing our private faith in a public world.

And I quite like that description. I also think that it's not always about the big things, but it's about the small everyday ordinary moments that we as Jesus' followers live out our lives as salt and light.

As his followers, we have the awesome privilege and the massive responsibility of influencing the world around us.

So in closing before we move into a time of communion, here's what Jesus is saying to his true followers:

(SLIDE 18)

You are like salt for the whole human race.
Translation? You can enhance the lives of people.

(SLIDE 19)

You are like light for the whole world.
In other words, you can illuminate God for people.

Let's pray.

Communion

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness."

As his followers, we always have his light, and he will always brighten up the path for us.

To live as salt and light in this world for God you need one thing, to have a personal living faith-based relationship with Jesus.

One way we cultivate and celebrate this relationship is through communion.

Communion is the chance to give it all back to Jesus. To thank him for what He's done and doing. And to ask him to continue to use us in his world.

It's an important time to connect with Jesus and what He has done for us.

So let's do that now.