

Doing Good by being different. Matthew 5:1-16

Marginalised

If I were to make the claim in the public space – radio, TV, the university, that the health and soundness of our society depended on the vitality of the Christian movement – what do you think would be the response?

Incredulity?

Ridicule?

Instant dismissal?

Perhaps irritation at such an overinflated view?

How do you respond to such a claim?

Many talk of our time as 'post Christian', and view being a Christian as adherence to an outmoded and largely discredited world view, as either a hangover of a religious upbringing, a sign of personal insecurity or someone who is no good at sport trying to find a supportive community.

The Christian faith's official position is at the margins of society, as illustrated in the passing of the suppression legislation without amendment over the objections of so many church leaders

In fact some see it not just as an irrelevant relic but as positively harmful with its views on sexuality and other matters of personal morality, an enemy of the personal autonomy at the heart of human flourishing.

The vitality of the Christian movement essential to the health of our society?

An absurd claim, not something that would ever come into the heads of our contemporaries

And it can be easy for believers to start seeing our own living the Christian life like that

Some kind of hobby, personally satisfying but not of much relevance to anyone else

Something to be willing to be flexible about

Something to be kept to ourselves

As important to society as say our membership of a chess club,

Of no community significance beyond the happiness of its participants

But Jesus has a completely different take on the place, on the role, of His followers in the world.

Jesus' view 5:13-16

Speaking to his disciples [5:1-2], those who follow Him, believe the gospel He is preaching, listen to and learn from Him, He says

Matthew 5: ¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus says His followers are Salt and light – that is both good for the world and necessary, necessary to stop the world going off, society being enveloped in darkness

Salt

Salt for his first hearers was not an optional condiment to be indulged in by those who are not worried about their blood pressure.

His was a world without refrigeration. Food – fish and meat – was preserved by salting. Salt stopped the rot, stopped them going off. Salt was also used medicinally – rubbed into wounds to stop infection. It was valuable, accompanying sacrifices in the temple. And it was also a welcome seasoning to bring out the flavours in cooked food. Salt is good says Jesus in Mark 9:50 and Luke 14:34, and all his contemporaries would have agreed.

Jesus is saying that His followers are necessary to stop the world going off, and to make it a more palatable place.

Light

And they are light. We all know the goodness and necessity of light. Light is the source of great beauty, enriching our world by revealing its colours and detail. Light helps protect us by revealing dangers and guiding us safely on our way. And it is necessary for life. No light, no photosynthesis, no sustaining of life. The threat of a nuclear winter is the threat of prolonged darkness, of the denial of light. Light is good, useful, necessary.

That is the way Jesus thinks about His followers in relation to the world, to human society

Salt and light – preserving, enhancing, protecting, life, the life of the world, of human society.

And they have this role, not by being like the world, but in being distinct from, different from the world in which they live

Salt has its effect by not being what it is applied to

Light is the mutually exclusive opposite of darkness

And just as these images tell us Jesus has a quite different view of the role of His followers, so they also tell us He has a different view of the world

It is a world that needs salt and light

Our society wants to see itself as being on a journey of inevitable progress, increasing in enlightenment, getting better and better,

As having in itself, in humanity alone, all it needs to promote its own flourishing, to secure its future.

But Jesus thinks of it as always in danger because of its rebellion against God its King

In danger of decay, going off, of its sin making it less and less palatable, less and less a good place to be

And In danger of being overtaken by darkness – the darkness of injustice and unrighteousness, of ignorance of the true God

A place in need of salt and light, the salt and light only His followers bring – You are ...

Jesus' estimate of the role of His followers, of the necessity of His followers for the preservation and enhancement of life in the world, for the health and rich enjoyment of the world, is completely at odds with the modern marginalisation of loyalty to Jesus

Shocking, Almost megalomaniacal.

And even more unusual, more shocking, is how Jesus thinks His followers have this role, how they exercise their good effect.

Think how others seek to exert influence in a society

By founding great institutions?

By being grand strategists for change?

By co-ordinated political campaigning?

By campaigns of social action?

Is this the way Jesus says His followers are to be salt and light?

Perhaps at different times and for different reasons Christians may be involved in all these things, or refrain from involvement in those things, but none of them are at the heart of their being salt and light in the world

Does it depend on having power – of any kind – institutional, political, social, at all, the power people think they need to have influence, make change?

How are Jesus' followers to be salt and light in the world?

How? By being Jesus' people

Jesus says they have this role, do good to the world in which they live, by being genuinely Jesus' followers.

You are – those listening to me, who believe my preaching of the Kingdom, who embrace the repentance the gospel calls for,

you who reckon because I am the King who brings God's kingdom those I pronounce blessed are truly blessed and so seek to be those people, You are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.

Jesus' followers are salt and light, we are salt and light, as we are genuinely disciples of Jesus embracing the life Jesus calls blessed. We looked at that life last week, but let's refresh our memories

*Matthew 5:*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 meek, 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 are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We are salt and light - As we are poor in Spirit – not full of ourselves, not self righteous – but knowing our spiritual bankruptcy, that our only hope is in turning back to the LORD by believing His Son and receiving His forgiveness, in living a life of repentance and faith as we look to Him to give us the Kingdom. We don't think we can seize or establish it ourselves

As we mourn – as we are real about the horror and pain of death and the judgement that falls on us all, take seriously and are grieved by the effects of sin, our own and that of others.

As we are meek – gentle and humble in relating to others, not going on about our own rights, not demanding we be respected and get our own way, but seeking to promote the interests, the welfare, of others, entrusting our cause to God

As we hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is not telling others how to live, but being passionate about living rightly ourselves, and knowing that living rightly is living rightly before God, the Lord of His creation. We want to do what He says pleases Him.

As we are merciful, moved to respond to need, giving people good they do not deserve, and not exacting vengeance on our enemies

As we are pure in heart, motivated by a concern for God's honour and glory, not for our own power or position; seeking to please Him only, not seeking popularity and the praise of others

As we are peace makers – Being people who know that at the heart of peace is peace with God and so seeking to make peace by preaching the gospel of Jesus, the gospel of His death for sin and rising again, the gospel which reconciles us to God and overcomes the divisions between us where it is believed.

And as we are prepared to suffer to keep on being this person, Jesus' person, to live with Jesus as our King, our Lord, and in suffering not becoming bitter and angry but rejoicing at being His

It is only by being this person, embracing Jesus' values, having the character Jesus calls for in those who belong under His rule ,

Only as we are people who live under the rule of God's crucified King now and who will one day know to the full what they have already started to enjoy - the comfort, the inheritance, the satisfaction of their longing, the mercy, knowing God, the belonging to His family, that only Jesus brings

that we are salt and light

Before it is anything we do, we are salt and light by who we are as Jesus' followers

And being that person will then show itself in a distinctive life

Jesus says by being who you are as my followers – so you are salt and light in our world

By keeping on willing to be different in the way Jesus teaches us to be different

Willing to be different because we believe the gospel and confess the crucified Jesus Lord

That is how we do good in the world

The good effect of Jesus' followers in the world has nothing to do with possessing power and everything to do with being faithful to Jesus

But let's think about being different

The images of salt and light reinforce the necessity, the inevitability, of Jesus' followers being different from the world in which they live

And we need to face the challenge of being different directly because being different is

Unpopular – we don't like it, being the odd one out, the one others look at; and those we are amongst don't like our being different. It is unsettling, it upsets what people want to take for granted

And Being different is Work – it is that little bit of extra effort to ask – would Jesus want me to go along with this behaviour, embrace that goal, share in that language. It is work to take what we hear and see and test it against the truth of the gospel, work we have to do all the time for the world is very good at promoting its values.

Take the movie Babe – we all feel good for Babe at the end, but it is an unhelpful message

It's not the familiar story of overcoming disadvantage by hard work and talent

Like it, but different. The message is you can transcend your nature, be whatever you wish to be, if you want it enough – pigs can become dogs. You can be whatever you think you are.

Very different message, a dangerous counterfeit – that has the seeds of confusion and tragedy

So many messages - Retirement is me time – how is that consistent with being meek, putting others interests ahead of our own?

Everything is ok as long as it doesn't hurt anyone – sounds good, but it is saying you can be a law to yourself? How does that sit with hungering and thirsting for righteousness, being pure in heart

Constantly told our life will be transformed by this or that purchase. Want to feel good in the face of life's trials and difficulties – spend money. Surely better to mourn and seek real comfort.

Being different is work

Being different is a challenge to the discipling of our children. Most of the time we don't want our kids to be the odd one out. Talk of difference can prompt fearfulness for them in our hearts

Of what will happen if he or she is the only one in preschool who thinks Santa is a dangerous myth preaching a works gospel,

Or how they will take it if something they really want to do and their friends all accept as normal clashes with living Jesus' way, with belonging to Jesus' people

Or if they are identified as the only one in their class who thinks sex outside marriage of a man and a woman is a sin

And we know they are already burdened by high behavioural expectations – being kind to the unpopular kid, being respectful of teachers, patient with those teasing them, truthful even when it will get them into trouble

We fear that being different will be particularly hard on our children whom the Lord has given to us to bring up as disciples of Jesus, to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord

But being different is what we are by Jesus' calling,

A people with a different Lord – a different authority directing how we live our lives

A different hope and goal for life – not success or power or wealth in this life, not even of undisturbed but moderate comfort and a happy family – but the reign of God, a place in the new heaven and earth

A different vision of the good, the blessed, life

To be Jesus' disciple, to be willing to be different to be salt and light, we Need to be convinced of the Truth of the gospel

And being convinced of the truth of the gospel we will also be convinced that this is a good difference, a difference that is good for all, good for our children – for the crucified Jesus is Lord

That it is helpful to teach them that we are different, and why it is good to be different

And so a difference to be embraced and sustained wholeheartedly

Don't shield you children from the difference. Rather teach and model yourself how to live this different life

For as we will see, this is not to be a temporary difference, a phase in life

And it is not a difference meant to be hidden

And this difference cannot be lived out not by withdrawing, becoming a sheltered defensive ghetto – salt and light are spread abroad to have their good effect.

If we withdrew, we could just deal with people like us all the time but Jesus wants us, expects us as salt and light to be in the world while being different from the world, to continually engage with our neighbours for their good

When you think about being different, the discomfort and the cost of that, you can see why there is a temptation to stop being different, a temptation Jesus warns us about

By staying distinct v. 13

Matthew 5: 13 “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

Salt losing its taste is a strange idea for us. We all have refined salt, sodium chloride, in our cupboards. It only ceases to be salt when it ceases to be. How can salt ever be anything but salt, ever lose its taste?

But the salt of the first century residents of Israel was cut from the salt pans around the Dead Sea and brought up to the towns and villages in big chunks, chunks that were a mixture of many minerals and particularly gypsum. When it rained the more soluble salt was washed away leaving something that looked essentially the same but, having lost its salt, had lost its saltiness. That saltiness could not be restored for only salt, the very thing now absent, has the properties of salt. What remained wasn't good for anything but to be tossed out, and not tossed where most of their rubbish went – the dung heap or the field – but out onto the paths and roads, to be trampled underfoot

They knew that salt had to retain its distinctiveness to be of any value, and when it loses it – what remained was useless and worthless

What Jesus says we know is true. We have too many examples of what looks like salt having lost its taste, people who had the appearance of Christians but had given up following Jesus and lost their distinctiveness and become no use to anyone

You can think immediately of notorious examples of hypocrisy, like clergy who abuse children, or Ravi Zacharias exposed as a sexual predator, but the danger of looking at them is that it can blind us to the way we can lose our distinctiveness as followers of Jesus

We can, for example, feel our way of life threatened and then engage with others in the political sphere – but not to love others and bring glory to Jesus but to get power to preserve our own inherited privileges and comfort.

If we are to engage in political debate, as all of us to a greater or lesser extent must in a democratic society with compulsory voting, we will only be salt as those who, trusting Jesus, seek to be meek, peacemakers, merciful, humble

Or we can be seduced by material prosperity, see being well off as our birthright in this country, and so temper our mercy or desire to please God when it threatens our wealth, or worse start to use religion as a cloak for greed and putting, like our society, our hope in wealth and not in God

Or we can start to feel the pressure of being ridiculed and marginalised for following Jesus, and want to accommodate Christian truth to the prevailing intellectual and moral climate, people who take their lead from the world and in so doing betray the world.

Don't be salt that loses its taste

So how to stay distinctive – salt that really is salt?

It starts with keeping Jesus as big in your life as He really is – the Lord, the one through whom and for whom all things were made, the one now with all authority, the One who will be revealed in glory, and so we

Keep on thinking those blessed are those Jesus declares blessed

And we practice real relationship with the holy God – confessing our poverty of spirit in confessing our sins, and then rejoicing in His graciously including us in His reign now through the death of His Son

Practice Real relationship with other believers, where we know each other well enough to spur one another on

Never lose concern for the salvation of others, keeping the big issues of judgment and salvation before us

And trusting Jesus meeting persecution, slander, misrepresentation, with joy

We have to stay salty, preserve our distinctiveness by being His disciples

And Jesus says we must also be willing to be openly different. We cannot try and be invisible as His followers, to bend over backwards to blend in. We have been saved to be seen

By staying visible vv. 14-15

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Light by its nature – is seen in the darkness, it can't be hidden

A lamp is lit, a light turned on, to be seen.

The Lord Jesus calls us into His kingdom, calls us to follow, to be seen. A hidden light is useless

We are light as we are open followers of Jesus, glad to own His lordship, to give as the reason for our different life our loyalty to Him. And Jesus calls us to let our lights shine

Let your light shine v. 16

¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

It is a call to keep on following Jesus, living by His teaching

And Then others will see the good works that inevitably flow from that – for to embrace the blessed life will show itself in doing good

This is Not a doing good to be seen by others and earn their praise – the behaviour Jesus criticises at the beginning of Chapter 6

No – it is living openly as Jesus' follower, living to please Him, and then people seeing the good that you do because you are a follower of Jesus, and they will praise the Father in heaven

What are these good works that will be seen where we live as followers of Jesus?

And why will it result in praise of our Father?

Good works [Ephesians 2:10, Titus 2:14, 3:8; 1 Peter 2:13]

The good works are not specified but three comments

1. These are Good works done by those who are poor in Spirit, who have repented and believed the gospel and so received the Kingdom as a gift. These are not done to earn a place in God's Kingdom. They are the fruit of the gift of living under Jesus' rule

2. Good works will flow naturally and inevitably from a commitment to live the blessed life

If you are Merciful – support for a sponsored child, or help for a needy neighbour

If you are a peacemaker you will seek ways of sharing the gospel of Jesus that brings peace with God

If you are pure in heart you won't be corrupted by greed but be fair and just

3. Good works will flow from a commitment to the teaching of Jesus, to the righteousness that Jesus is about to call His followers to, the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the pharisees, and which He will illustrate in the rest of chapter 5

That commitment will be seen in many ways: faithfulness in marriage producing the good of a stable home, generosity to others, seeking reconciliation that heals instead of the anger that harms, even love of enemies, doing good to those that hate us that counters tribalism

Good works are not specified because in a sense they are infinite. God has prepared for each of us good works to do [Eph. 2:10]

Their shape depends on your life – for the good works are how these commitments work out in the circumstances of our life, your gifts, your opportunities

Often, like the good Samaritan who did not set out to conduct a mission to the wounded – the good works find you. Where you are committed to being Jesus' person, you will know how to respond to the need you meet.

And sometimes you will see and pursue the good works God calls you to

Sometimes they will be big, and get attention

Like the work of Catherine Hamlin and Andrew Browning

Catherine Went to Ethiopia with her husband in 1959, answering an ad placed by the Ethiopian government looking for an obstetrician and gynecologist. She saw a lot of women whose lives were ruined by damage done in childbirth, and stayed and established the Addis Ababa fistula hospital in 1974, and then 5 regional hospitals – treated 60,000 patients for fistula transforming their lives, established a college of midwives 2007

Book "The Hospital by the River"

and Andrew Browning – not sure if great nephew, but a believer who deliberately trained to carry on that work – took it to the rest of sub Saharan Africa

Sometimes our good works will be known only to those who benefit from them, like the work of Tim Winton's neighbour who turned up to help his mother bath his dad who had been injured in a motor bike accident

[Tim Winton interview with Rachael Kohn Sprit of Things, Sunday 26th December 2004

"He [Tim's Dad] had a great big bandage on his throat where the air was coming out because he'd had a tracheotomy, his whole body was different, and everything seemed broken, and I guess it was having him as a long-term invalid in the house, changed the atmosphere of the house and changed our lives in an interesting way. And this guy used to come, he just turned up, a man turned up at our door and he used to offer to help Mum look after my Dad.

My Dad was a big bloke, and Mum just couldn't get him into the bath, so this bloke used to show up and carry him into the bath and bathe him, and I remember being a little boy with my ear pressed to the bathroom door, and just listening to them talk. And it turned out that this guy was a member of the local church, and he'd heard that Dad was sick and he just showed up to help, and I think that was the course - that was part of what set my parents on a course to being converted."]

But being Jesus' person we should do good, and we will do good – good trees bear good fruit, – God will bring good works to you, and you to the good works He has prepared

As you are the person Jesus calls you to be

And being that person, engaging in those works – you will bring glory to your Father

Why glorify the Father?

Why do our good works cause those who see them to glorify your Father?

Notice it is Your Father. Jesus teaches His followers that they, trusting Him, start to share in His relationship to the living God – He is our Father, and we live under His authority, and know His Care, protection and love

But Why is He praised?

It is because If Jesus' followers live as light and salt in the world, giving themselves to do what Jesus has taught, to be the person Jesus calls blessed

It is because the Father has sent the Son

It is because the Father has vindicated the teaching of the Son and established His authority, shown the life of disciples to be in truth the blessed life

It is because the Father has graciously given the Son authority to include in His family all who repent and believe

The Father who has entrusted to the Son the Spirit that changes the life of all who repent and believe

The Father is praised because He is the source of all the good we do, the sustainer of the lives of Jesus' followers, and the good we do reflects His generous, merciful, goodness

Do good by keeping on being who we are, Jesus' distinct people.

Don't believe the spin of our secular world

That Commitment to Jesus is irrelevant or even harmful to the well being of the world, of society

To be called to be Jesus' follower is a high calling, a calling to do good by being salt and light in a world that is always threatening to decay, always in danger of being overwhelmed in darkness

But don't think there is any other way to be salt and light except by being Jesus' disciple, on His terms

You will never become more useful to the world by abandoning Jesus, abandon being directed by His teaching – you will be useless, worse than useless

Only by persevering in the distinct life, the different life, of being Jesus' follower, in being those who belong under His reign by holding fast to His teaching can we be salt and light

And that is love

Love of our Father – praised

Love of our neighbours

So When you are tempted to think being different is too hard, remember this life is for the poor in Spirit, people who don't think they have the resources in themselves and constantly are looking to the Lord Jesus to supply the forgiveness and life they need

When you are tempted to think this life is too costly, remember this is the life of those who will know the blessing of the reign of God, who now in part and one day in full experience that comfort and satisfaction or their longing, who inherit the new heaven and earth, who are God's children – it is too costly not to be different

This different life is the life, the only life, for those who know the love and faithfulness of the Lord Jesus, the saving King – know it because they know He has died for their sin and been raised with all authority and power – and so follow Him

Let your light shine