

*“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. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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.”* Matthew 5:13-16

This past Thursday evening Nancy and I returned to a hot, smoky, busy Port Alberni after 10 days away in a quiet, remote ocean-front cabin, where the sun was shining but the temperature moderate for the cool ocean breeze. It is good to be home? Yes, it is good to be home. Well, while we were gone we both received letters from the Government of Canada with a Notice to Appear in Parksville on Friday, August 18 to take the Oath of Citizenship. It is good to be home - after the countless hours of wading through all the paperwork of applying to become Temporary Residents (with two applications for extensions); and applying three times to become Permanent Residents (because of the changes that still continue with immigration laws) and one application for an extension; and after studying and taking English proficiency tests and the Citizenship of Canada Knowledge tests, we are finally down to being sworn in and singing “O’ Canada” together with people from other countries who will do the same.

It is good to be home - as good as “home” can be here on earth. As born again followers of Jesus we do have a “home” that is monumentally greater and massively more glorious than anything good we could ever call home here on earth. And that home is not so much as place as it is a person. This is what Jesus has been talking to us about all throughout the first twelve verses of Matthew 5. When we put our faith in God - our place, our “home” is the “Kingdom of God” (*“Kingdom of Heaven”*) - and the person who lives there, who rules and reigns there is God Himself. And the monumentally greater and massively more glorious thing is that when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts, so that the Kingdom of God becomes a *place* in our hearts where the *person* of God lives and reigns and rules by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

But when this happens, we will be changed, as our hearts, souls and lives will be dramatically transformed by God – which will then cause the sin that still lives within our flesh to rise up within us and make war against us, with the empowerment and encouragement of the devil and the spirit of the world that we live in. In the midst of this war within our hearts, Jesus’ battle cry is: “Be different!” In each one of the Blessings of the Beatitudes we have been going through over the past eight weeks, Jesus has been telling how the Kingdom of God functions in opposition to our human way of thinking. In each statement, Jesus forces us to readjust our thinking - and he puts each Beatitude in definite order of spiritual sequence, revealing the steps, the way, the path by which we can gain entrance into the heart of God - and the steps, the way, the path, by which our hearts and souls gain entrance into the Kingdom.

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is about how people in the kingdom of God should live out their lives. Since Jesus Christ is God, the Sovereign King of the Universe; the Son of God, Lord and Savior; the Holy Spirit as the presence and power of God - we are to trust and submit and obey Him in all things. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ is our King and we are His subjects. The first six verses of Matthew 5 had to do with our heart attitude towards God. The second six verses of Matthew 5 had to do with our heart attitude toward others. And now, in Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus tells us we must deal with our heart attitude towards living out the character of the Kingdom that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 5:1-12. Over the past two months Jesus has taught us that the steps, the path, the way that leads us into the character of Kingdom of God is that of being spiritually-poor, sin-grieving, humbly-dependent, God-pursuing, merciful, pure-hearted, peacemaking with joyful endurance-in-the-face-of- persecution people, whose transformed hearts and lives are dramatically different than the fallen world we live in. This is the fulfillment of Jesus’ call for us to be his witnesses that he declared before he rose into heaven.

*So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Acts 1:6-8*

It is highly significant to note that Jesus' response to the disciple's question if he would "*restore the kingdom*" was to tell the disciples that 1) God sovereignly and supremely rules as King as to when and how the "*kingdom*" would be restored and, 2) as the supreme ruler of the universe God will empower Jesus' disciples to be his "*witnesses*" of the "*kingdom*" when it does come. And again, it is more than significant that after Jesus declared that his followers be his "*witnesses*" of being Spirit empowered citizens of the "*kingdom*" of God in Acts 1:6-8; and after Jesus then taught us the steps, the path, the way that leads us into the character of Kingdom of God in Matthew 5:1-12; Jesus then affirms our call to be witnesses of the "*kingdom*" of God and affirms the spiritual power by which we can live out the character of the "*kingdom*" of God – when Jesus teaches us how to pray in Matthew 6:9-10: "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*"

Our Lord is telling us here that we should open our prayers with first acknowledging that God is the Supreme King over everyone and everything ("*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name*") – and then we are to pray that God would so powerfully reign in our hearts and lives that we would be "*witnesses*" of the character of "*kingdom*" ("*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*") – in Port Alberni and "*in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria*" and Vancouver Island and British Columbia and Canada and North America "*and to the end of the earth.*" Jesus closes this introductory kingdom-character defining section in his Sermon on the Mount by giving us two pictures that affirm the intimate relationship between character and conduct in the "*kingdom.*"

*"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. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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."* Matthew 5:13-16

If we are truly a people of the kingdom, our lives will have a transformational effect on our culture and society. Kingdom conduct flows out of kingdom character. Character always comes before conduct, because what we are inside of our hearts determines what we do in our lives. Jesus is telling us here that we are called to live out the character of the kingdom by being salt and light. Both salt and light are common concepts with images and metaphors which most of us can understand. The functions of salt and light are also helpful as they imply something about the larger world that we live in.

*"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."* In Jesus' day salt was a necessity of life and thus great value was attached to it. Salt was not only used to season and preserve good but also used for money. Roman soldiers were often paid with salt. Our word "salary" comes from the Latin word *salarium* or "salt money" which referred to the payments of salt in ancient times to soldiers. This is where the phrase "worth your salt" comes from. Salt speaks of our *inward character* and there are three functions of salt which reflect the kingdom character of salt that we are to live out.

1) Salt gives flavor. Salt by itself doesn't taste very good but when it's applied to food it unleashes the flavor. As Christians we are God's seasoning in the world. Just as salt adds flavor and fires up the taste buds, so should we be living out our lives in Jesus with more zest for others. Christians should be adding the joyful spice of the risen Christ to a world that is getting ever more dark and spiritually bland. Psalm 34:8 says: "*Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!*"

2) Salt is a preservative. There are two substances mentioned in the Bible that are very small and yet extremely influential – *salt and yeast*. They picture opposite forces in the world. While yeast is actually a mold that represents evil, salt is a preservative that holds back decay. Salt was essential for survival in the days prior to refrigeration because it was the only way they had to preserve meat. The salt was rubbed into the meat before it was stored. Used in this way, salt doesn't make something good; it just keeps it from going bad. And just as salt was to hinder and arrest the process of decay, so too are those who possess the character of the kingdom given the task of arresting the spiritual moral decay of our world. It doesn't take much to see that the world we live in is on a path toward ever increasing deprivation and destruction. All around us there is war and terrorism and division and uncertainty.

There is an ever-growing sense of evil that permeates our own lives and the world at large – because people are choosing to live their lives apart from God. In this we are to be “salt” preserving the sanctity of life for the unborn and for those in emotional distress; preserving the sexual purity of God's design in creating males and females; preserving the glory of God in a world that promotes the “self” as God. Ray Pritchard once said: “We who follow Jesus Christ are to be a ‘moral disinfectant’ stopping the spread of evil. We are to be the conscience of the community, speaking out for what is true and right.” Kingdom character exudes a preserving influence to retard moral and spiritual spoilage in the world.

3) Salt creates thirst. Most likely we all have experienced the thirst that invades our bodies and minds after we have eaten salty food. It has been rumored that some restaurant buffets add extra salt to their food – so that customers drink more water causing them to make fewer trips to the feeding trough. When we live out the kingdom character of God with those who don't know Christ, God uses us to make people thirsty for Jesus. In part, along with seasoning, this is what Paul may have been thinking when he wrote Colossians 4:5-6: “*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.*” Jesus said: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*”

Salt is a seasoning, it's a preservative, and it makes people thirsty. This is our kingdom call to live out as followers of Jesus Christ. But Jesus also gives us a warning. “*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.*” The reality of this is that salt that has lost its “saltiness” is no longer salt. When Jesus tells us that's such salt “*is no longer good for anything*” he is also saying that when we no longer see our ourselves as poor in spirit or see the need to mourn over sin or do not want to be humbly dependent or are no longer hungry and thirsty for righteousness or don't feel like being merciful or are tired of trying to be pure in heart or just refuse to make peace – we will no longer be a threat and we will most likely not be persecuted for Jesus, because we have lost our witness for Jesus. Our faith, our testimony, is “*no longer good for anything*” when our kingdom character has “*has lost its taste.*”

Sadly, this is what we are seeing. George Barna's research shows that, “... the average Christian in the average church is almost indistinguishable from the rest of society. The fundamental moral and ethical difference that Christ can make in how we live is missing.” If we who claim to be of the character of the Kingdom of God lose the qualities of Christ-likeness that make us distinctly different, and become like the society and culture around us, we no longer have a positive impact. We then become a hindrance instead of a preservative. In losing our saltiness in Christ, we become pepper spray. In his book “Salt for Society” Phillip Keller writes: “The peculiar property of salt is that even though it may have lost its pungency... it still retains one very devastating potency. This rare and remarkable material can still ... destroy plant life on the land... the same principle applies in the case of the Christian. Either our lives or counting for good and for God or they are making an impact for evil and the enemy... The way we live, the things we say the attitudes we entertain, the life style we adopt... are continuously producing either positive or negative results in society... Our lives, whether we are aware or not either count for God or against Him. There simply is no middle ground.” We are called by Jesus to be salt for Jesus.

Jesus also calls us to be light: *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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.”* Salt is a hidden but powerful influence, but *“light”* on the other hand, is a visible and revealing influence. *“Light”* speaks of the outward reflection of an inward character that can be seen through good works that points to the *“kingdom.”* *“Light”* is one of the fundamental needs of humanity in that *“light”* has been associated with the presence, truth and redemptive activity of God since creation. Before Adam and Eve were created, we read that God created light in Genesis 1:3-5: *“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.”* Throughout the Bible, *“light”* represents truth, grace, and the work of God, while darkness symbolizes sin, evil, and the works of Satan. The New Testament presents Jesus Christ as the personification of *“light.”* In John 1:4 we read that: *“In him was life, and the life was the light of men.”*

In our text for today Jesus mentions two sources of *“light.”* The first is a *“city on a hill.”* Those listening to Jesus that day would have immediately thought of cities that were built on mountains. With the homes that would have been constructed out of white limestone, these towns glistened in the sun and could not be easily hidden. The second light source is *“a lamp.”* Homes back then generally had just one room which served as a combination living and dining area. To one side would be a large chest containing pots and baskets and bowls. As evening drew near and darkness fell, the chest would be placed in the center of the room for use as a table for supper. A candle or lamp would be carefully lit and placed on the top. It was the only light in the room. As the family gathered for supper, they turned their backs to the darkness and the light illuminated their faces. Those listening knew the importance of the single source of light in the center of the room - and they would have thought it absurd that someone would take a *“basket”* and put it over a *“lamp”* - because then there would have been no *“light.”* There are three functions of *“light”* which reflect the kingdom character of light that we are to live out.

1) Light dispenses darkness. The first function of light is to dispel darkness so that we can see. John 1:4-5 says this about Jesus, *“In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* Jesus came to rid of the world of darkness - but many rejected the *“light”* of Christ because the brightness of his *“light”* was too painful to their eyes *because* Jesus’ *“light”* revealed that he truly was God, and Lord and Savior. In John 8:12 Jesus proclaimed: *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* Colossians 1:12-14 tells us we should give thanks to the Father, *“who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”* The *“light”* of Jesus dispenses all darkness.

2) Light gives guidance. When we live out our faith in the midst of our family and friends and neighbors and the world – the light of our kingdom character can and will guide people to the path of following Jesus. Psalm 119:105 says, *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* Psalm 119:130 says, *“The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.”* Ephesians 5:8-10 states: *“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.”* Jesus has passed the light of his life to his spiritual offspring. Jesus has moved on so we could step in. Just as his kingdom character illuminated the way out of darkness for us into a relationship with God, so we, by the way we live and the things we do, are to be witnesses to guide people to the *“light”* of Jesus.

3) Light reveals what is real. Psalm 34:5 says, *“Those who look to Him are radiant.”* As we focus our hearts and lives on Jesus, His light will radiate on everything we think, say and do - and those who see and hear us will want to experience the light of the kingdom character that we have radiating deep within our hearts. 2 Corinthians 4:6 tells us, *“‘For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’”*

*“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.”* The phrase *“let your light shine”* means “to beam or radiate brilliancy.” When we shine for Jesus, people will “see” and “know” that what we think, say and do comes from God. But Jesus did not tell us to live out lives in such a fashion that people will see our good deeds so they might know what wonderful, outstanding people we are. A lamp does not call attention to itself. It is simply placed on a lamp-stand from which it will give the best illumination. It is not always easy to do *“good works”* in a way that will gets people to praise God rather than the one performing the act, but it is still commanded. We are not called to be magnificent chandeliers for the world to admire. We are called to be the little single-bulb nightlight in the pitch-dark hallway of life to guide those who walk there to the light of Christ. But that is what spiritually-poor, sin-grieving, humbly-dependent, God-pursuing, merciful, pure-hearted, peacemaking with joyful endurance in-the-face-of- persecution people do – *because* they have the character of the Kingdom of God within their hearts.

Our lives should be lives that reflect something more than the world has, because we have more than they have. We have Jesus! He has saved us, forgiven us, changed our hearts, transformed our lives, given us hope, put His love in us, given us joy, set our feet on the rock which cannot be shaken. Jesus has called us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world – and we are to work that out in the world we live in, giving glory to God and to God only. But we can’t do this alone. We need each other. And God knows that. And that is why Jesus created the church, which Ephesians 1:23 tells us is Jesus’ *“body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”* The church is the physical presence of Christ on earth.

We should never dismiss the church on any pretense but rather embrace the church, bringing our souls, our minds, and our sense of calling into what Christ established as his instrument for changing the world. That means making a commitment to the church, taking our place in the church, and being involved as a fully functioning member. The truth is you cannot truly follow Christ apart from being intimately connected, committed and involved in the body of Christ. So much of what is involved in being devoted to God, following Jesus and being led and empowered by the Spirit is tied to the texts of Scripture that tell us we are to serve one another, care for one another, love one another, live in harmony with one another, accept one another, bear one another’s burdens, pray for one another, and forgive one another. These are not only clear in their commands to us, essential in our daily spiritual walk and impossible to fill apart from working hand in hand together as the local community of faith – these are also the means by which we can be the greatest witness of the kingdom character as salt and light. The reality of this is that none of us sins alone, serves alone or succeeds alone. If we try to do so we will lose our way and undermine how Jesus envisioned his presence be affirmed in the eyes of the world.

But this all begins when each one of us is truly devoted to Jesus Christ – how committed, how much of ourselves we are willing to sacrificially give to God as he graciously and sacrificially gave to us through Jesus Christ. If we are truly following Jesus, the Holy Spirit will fill our hearts and lives with Himself – which will radically, drastically and dramatically transform us and transform those with whom we have relationships with. A Spirit-filled life will significantly affect the relational environment of our church, will significantly affect the relational environment of the community we live in, and will ultimately significantly affect to the relational environment of the entire world. That’s what happened after the Spirit came down on God’s people at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit moved in and produced a beautiful unity of heart in that first group of believers, and by the power of the Spirit, *“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.* Acts 2:42

If we are truly a people of the kingdom of God, our lives will have a transformational effect on our culture and society. The world is searching for answers to the meaning of life. But the answers that they are being given for what is happening are elusive and confusing. And so many today are walking around in the darkness, ever busy living out their lives for bland purposes – with no hope beyond whatever might make them happy for the moment. That’s why Jesus calls us to be salt and light. Notice that Jesus does not say: "Become salt" or "Become light." He doesn't say: "Use salt," or "Use light," as if we were some kind of tools of ministry. What he does say is: "You are salt. You are light." This is the very definition of who we are as people of the kingdom of God. Being salt and light is in our DNA as followers of Jesus, both as individuals and as body of Christ. How can we truly function as salt and light? We must first work at becoming a spiritually-poor, sin-grieving, humbly-dependent, God-pursuing, merciful, pure-hearted, peacemaking with joyful endurance-in-the-face-of- persecution people, who are dramatically different than the fallen world we live in. But we also must then move beyond our own comforts and own wants and our constant busyness – and respond to Jesus’ call to be salt and light by directly engaging the world around us, showing the love and forgiveness and joy and mercy and grace of the character of the kingdom of God, to those whom we cross paths with in this life.

The Roman Catholic Church has sainted twelve different people who are named Valentine, a name derived from the Latin word *Valens* which means “worthy, strong, powerful.” The most famous Saint Valentine of the lot was a Roman priest who was arrested and imprisoned for marrying Christian couples and aiding Christians, who were at the time being persecuted, at a time when helping Christians was considered a crime. When Valentine was brought before a judge, he shared his faith in Jesus with the judge. The judge decided to put Valentine’s faith to the test and the judge brought him his adopted daughter who was blind. If Valentine could restore the girl’s sight, the judge would do whatever he asked. Valentine laid his hands on her eyes and the child’s vision was restored. Immediately humbled, the judge asked Valentine what he should do. Valentine replied that all of the idols around the judge’s house should be broken, and that the judge should fast for three days and then undergo baptism. The judge obeyed and, as a result, he freed all the Christian prisoners under his authority – and the judge, his family, and the forty-four members of the judge’s household were baptized.

The judge then released Saint Valentine but he was arrested again for continuing to share his faith in Jesus. He was then sent to the emperor Cladius Gothicus. Claudius took a liking to Valentine until he tried to convince Claudius to embrace faith in Christ, whereupon Claudius refused and condemned Valentine to death, commanding that he either renounce his faith in Jesus or he would be beaten with clubs and beheaded. Valentine refused and he was executed on February 14, 269. Valentine knew he would get in trouble if he shared and lived out his faith. But he was salt for Jesus and he let his light shine for Jesus because Jesus reigned as King within his heart and in his life. Saint Valentine’s kingdom character empowered him to risk his life by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with those who needed to hear it. We might not be asked to die for our faith but we are called to be salt and light others for Jesus.

The tragedy of life is not so much that it ends so soon, but rather that we wait so long to begin living it. The life we were created for in Jesus Christ is a life that is to be lived in and for the Kingdom of God. In the Beatitudes Jesus told us that the life God created us for begins inside of us – and by the power of the Spirit continues to shape and mold our hearts as we live out our spiritually-poor, sin-grieving, humbly-dependent, God-pursuing, merciful, pure-hearted, peacemaking with joyful endurance-in-the-face-of- persecution lives, of being salt and light for Jesus so that those who have wandered from God may come home to God. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ - our place, our home is the Kingdom of God - and the person who lives there, who rules and reigns there is God Himself. It is good to be home - in Christ. Most of the people in the world we live in need to know that, and God created us and saved us and is calling us to be salt and light, so that everyone we meet will “*taste and see that the Lord is good*” and see that Jesus is “*the light of life.*” May our hearts and lives reflect the kingdom character of our Lord Jesus. Amen.