



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### BE NOT OF THIS WORLD

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

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#### INTRODUCTION

Here's a question I hear often: Why is the God of the Old Testament cruel and the God in the New Testament so full of love? As if there are two different Gods. . .OR, the God of the Old Testament is a less mature, almost juvenile version (i.e. given to temper tantrums and breaking His own rules).

People make a case against believing in God, stating that He is inconsistent. In the Old Testament, he commands the Israelites to "not murder".....then turns around and has them kill men, women, and children when they go up against other nations. How cruel!

In Deuteronomy 7:1-2 – *“When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations. . .nations larger and stronger than you—when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.”*

Well, you can see it would be easy for people to question God's character and abandon belief in Him. But you've got to examine the context. Then you will understand that there were **two very valid reasons** why God commanded things like this:

1. These people had rejected God and were idol worshippers. Their habits & practices were abominable (e.g.: child sacrifice). They had brought judgment on themselves and their children. God was using Israel to judge them.
2. The Israelites were weak. They had a track record of backsliding into idol worship. It was for good reason that God didn't even want them to intermarry with these people. By clearing out the land, He was actually protecting Israel.

But, all through their history, the Israelites had a nasty habit of not doing what God told them to do. That has amazed our Thursday morning Old Testament study group again and again. Why don't they just wise up? According to Judges 3:5-7:

*“The Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. They took their daughters in marriage and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods. The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs.”*

Moses fell on his face in the dirt more than once pleading with God not to destroy the Israelites. He asked God over & over in their behalf for mercy, because they kept getting snagged up in the world around them. Amazing! Over & over again they saw the mighty hand of God act in their behalf. Yet they were all too quick to return to worshipping idols and adopting the worldly ways of their pagan neighbors.

God's original intention was for the Israelites to be a "light to the nations (the world around)"—to show others what a wonderful God He is. But how could they if they were constantly being contaminated by the rest of the world?

### FAST FORWARD TO THE NEW TESTAMENT ERA / THE EARLY CHURCH

Jesus is preaching to the crowds that great *Sermon on the Mount*. He has just finished *The Beatitudes*. You know: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. . .those who mourn. . .the meek. . .the peacemakers. . .those who show mercy, etc." And now he says (in Matthew 5:13-16) –

*<sup>13</sup>You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. <sup>14</sup>You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

The salt & light metaphors indicate that the disciples of Jesus have influence in this world.

What, you say? What possible influence could the people described in the Beatitudes exert in this hard, tough world? What lasting good can the poor and the meek do. . .the mourners and the merciful. . .and those who try to bring peace not war?

What can they accomplish whose only passion is an appetite for righteousness. . .whose only weapon is purity of heart? How could such a small minority achieve anything in this world bent on power, pleasure, and possessions?

Incredible as it may sound, Jesus declared the handful of Palestinian peasants to be the salt of *the earth* (not just their community) and the light of *the world* (not just their race). How far-reaching their influence was to be. . .and ours too. He prayed for them (and for us) in John 17:(14-18) –

*<sup>14</sup>I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. <sup>15</sup>My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them (set them apart for sacred use) by the truth. . .<sup>18</sup>As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

Now look at these two metaphors: SALT & LIGHT. Two indispensable household commodities. During his own boyhood Jesus must have often watched his mother use salt in the kitchen and light the lamps when the sun went down.

The need for light is obvious. Salt, on the other hand, has a variety of uses:

- Seasoning to give taste to food.  
If it were me, I'd say: "You are the **pepper** of the world!" ☺
- Preservative to prevent decay (in the days before refrigeration).  
Meat rubbed with coarse salt would keep indefinitely.

The point in all this is that the church (made up of the believers & followers of JC) and the world are distinct communities:

- There is "the earth" and "you & me as the earth's salt".
- There is "the world" and "you & me as the world's light".

These days it's fashionable to blur the distinction between the church & the world. . .between Christians & the surrounding culture. . .between the way we live & the way the rest of the world lives.

But Jesus wants us to maintain a distinctness, because the world manifests a constant tendency to deteriorate. The notion here is not that the world is tasteless and we Christians can add some spice to it . . .but pure and simple, the world is deteriorating, putrefying. It's going bad. The church slows down and in some instances reverses the decay of the world around it.

In a world where moral standards are relative, constantly changing and self-determined, the most powerful of all influences is God's own redeemed, regenerate, righteous people.

But our effectiveness as salt is conditional. Salt must retain its saltiness, or else it is good for nothing. We must retain our Christlikeness. If we as Christians become assimilated into "the world", if we become tainted by the impurities of the world, we lose our influence. Our influence as Christians in and on society depends on our being **distinct, not identical**.

*"Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold"* says Paul in Romans 12:2 (Phillips).

Let me raise TWO QUESTIONS this morning. . . . .

## I. HOW ARE WE PART OF THE WORLD?

This is a tough one, isn't it? We are so much a part of the world; the world is so much a part of us. We live in it and have contact with it on a daily basis. We rely on government, science, education, medical care, financial systems. They represent some of the necessary "alliances" we have made with the world. . .

- GOVERNMENT: We rely on government to protect our liberties and safeguard economic opportunity. But no amount of legislation can change people's hearts.
- SCIENCE: We enjoy the benefits of science & technology. But neither can explain or satisfy the deepest longings of our lives.
- EDUCATION: "Get a good education and you'll be set for life", my mother always said. But no degree could have prepared me for the crooks and turns that came into my life. My father told me, "You can be a preacher if you want, but you'll never make any money at it." He was right about that! ☺ But I wouldn't trade the rewards and benefits that have come for anything in the world. I have the best job in the world!
- MEDICAL CARE: Sure, we rely on the best of medicine to prolong our life and preserve its quality. How blessed we are to have such fine systems of care all around us. But you know, all the medical resources of University Health System couldn't save Carol, my first wife. . .Bill, Marcie's first husband. . .or Billy, her son and my step-son.
- FINANCIAL SYSTEMS: Sure, we plan for the future and try to manage our resources wisely and make them grow. We are concerned (rightly) about the national debt, social security, the stock market. But, it's a good reminder that is on our coins: "*In God we trust*" (rather than the coin itself).

The point here is NOT that making money, getting an education, saving up for retirement, doing scientific research, participating in government are wrong. They aren't!

- There may be a period of time you concentrate on getting a degree.
- You may have a passion for scientific research → becomes your life's contribution.
- You may well champion a political cause or candidate. . .or run for office yourself. . . or serve on a city council or school board → it's how you make a difference.
- Most of us have 401-K (et.al.) plans so we can enjoy retirement and remain financially independent for as long as possible.

To a large degree, we are like the rest of the world in these pursuits. But, do you know in your mind and your heart where you part company with “the rest of the world”? In what do you put your ultimate trust? To whom do you pledge your supreme allegiance? The WORLD or GOD?

Is there a fundamental difference in the way you approach these issues from the rest of the world? Or have you bought into the world’s philosophy of “gotta look out for ole #1”. . . “if it feels good, do it”. . . “grab for all the gusto you can (cause you only go around once)”. . . and all the other self-centered slogans that seem to abound these days?

## II. HOW ARE WE SET APART FROM THE WORLD?

God has called us out of the world—not to be eccentric, or weird, or different for different’s sake—but to be SALT, to be LIGHT.

It’s a tricky thing, but God wants us to be in the world, but not of the world. He wants us to be part of it, but not be seduced by it. He wants us to engage the culture but not be engulfed by it.

John writes in I John 2:15-17 (NRSV) –

*<sup>15</sup>Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world. <sup>16</sup>For all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. <sup>17</sup>And the world and its desires pass away, but those who do the will of God live forever.*

We are to be a cut above the world, so that His glory can shine through us. How will anyone ever know that following Jesus offers a different kind of life if Christians are just like everyone else? Your life may be the only book about Christ & Christianity that someone will ever read. Would anyone want to follow Jesus based on what they see and perceive in your life?

I fear it’s our lack of distinctiveness that has caused the church to be disregarded in contemporary society. I read an article the other day that brought that to light. . . . .

ILLUSTRATION: It was based on a conversation between a Christian leader and an airline stewardess on a flight to Australia. “Do you go to church”, he asked her. “No”, she replied. “It’s not that I’m angry with God or don’t believe in him. He just not a ‘player’.” “So help me understand,” the pastor said. “Have you been hurt in the past by the church somehow?” “No” she said. “My granny goes to church. And, I had a friend who recently went through a terrible tragedy, and the way her church stepped in and helped was incredible.” “So, do you believe in God?” “Well, of course I do” she answered. “I’m very spiritual, and so are most of my friends. We’re just not religious.” He went on to ask what it would take for her to be more proactive in her pursuit of a relationship with God, and she couldn’t answer in any definitive way. “I’m perfectly happy the way I am.” She was not angry, bitter, resentful. . .just indifferent!

Could it be, mused the writer of the article, that the church has lost its ability “to engage the culture at a significant depth”? That it (*we*) have lost our saltiness?

You know, the quality of salt that is most remarkable is its sharpness. Salt bites; it’s caustic. Jesus didn’t say, “You are the SUGAR or the HONEY of the world—go out there and sweeten things up.” He said, “You are the salt of the earth. Go live for what is right, for what is in My Word. Avoid like the plague that which is questionable, false, evil (or even has the “appearance” of evil). Take a bold stand for truth, goodness, righteousness—whether it be in your neighborhood, at your school, in your profession or business, in your lifestyle. Take a stand for the values that are being undermined by the media, by politicians, by pop culture.

Much of the rest of the world is pretty loose in what they watch. Sometimes there’s not much we can do about what we watch. There are not a lot of healthy choices out there. Look at the movie page—there are very few “family friendly” movies with little or no “objectionable content”.

But sometimes we do buy into the world's acceptance of sexual infidelity, cohabitation, and distorted definitions of marriage. In spite of what is popularly believed, research indicates that living together before marriage greatly **reduces** the chances of a marriage lasting a lifetime. And yet we argue with God's Word about stuff like this.

*The result?* Our rates of divorce and failed marriages match (in some places outstrip) the world's. Please don't take this as condemnation if you have or are going through the pain of a divorce. Please know that God's healing and redemption are available to you, no matter what the circumstances or reasons—even if you are to blame (and most of us are at least partly to blame in those situations anyhow).

If it feels like condemnation, remember it's evil + all the devil's schemes that are to be condemned (not people).

- The action of SALT is negative. Salt does bite. Salt does stop the spread of evil.
- The action of LIGHT is positive. It leads, it guides, it points the way to truth-beauty-goodness. We'll get to it next week.

## CONCLUSION

Exerting a godly influence in a world that desperately needs it—that's your job and mine. And, of course, our INFLUENCE depends on our CHARACTER. We must be consistent. Our talk, actions, behavior, lifestyle, profession of faith must all line up. We must do more than *talk the talk*; we must *walk the walk*—even if it makes us a little counter-culture. Be the salt of the earth! Your life will be blessed. . .you will serve the world around you. . .and God will be glorified.

AMEN!

## CLOSING WORDS

When we get it right (not perfect. . .we'll never get it perfect), the Scriptures say that. . .

### As salt:

We will put God first in our lives.  
We will stop manufacturing idols. . .stop trying to serve 2 masters.  
Not misuse the name of the Lord God with obscenity, with foolish talk & course joking.  
Remember and keep the Sabbath.  
Honor our father & mother – even those who have abused & hurt us.  
Not murder thru malicious anger & hatred, thru criticism or gossip.  
Not commit adultery – there will not be even a hint of sexual immorality;  
we will not even put ourselves in situations that encourage lust.  
Not steal, rip off, cheat people (either our employers or customers). We will be honest.  
Not bear false witness by lying to one another. We will speak truthfully and without deception.  
Not covet or try to gain what is not ours; or because of greed, live beyond our means.

[Exodus 20. . .*The Ten Commandments*]

### As salt:

We will not let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up.  
We will get rid of all bitterness, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.  
We will be kind and compassionate toward one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God has forgiven us.

[Ephesians 4:29-32]

### As salt:

We will put off the acts of the sinful nature (i.e.: what we would by nature gravitate toward were it not for God in our lives) – things like discord & argumentativeness, jealousy, fits of rage & anger, selfish ambition, factions & divisions, and envy.

And we will bear the Fruit of the Spirit, which is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

**[Galatians 5:19-23. .*The Fruit of the Flesh vs. the Spirit*]**

Now, go out and be *THE SALT OF THE EARTH!!!*