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First Baptist Vancouver

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Text: Matthew 5:13-16

“What The World Needs Now Is ...”

(Third in the series: Following Jesus into His Sermon on the Mount)

If you have walked or driven through the intersection of Nelson and Burrard this past week, or if you approached the Sanctuary this morning walking up Nelson Street, you likely noticed what is on the sign advertising this Sunday’s sermon. “What the world needs now is ...”, and then my name in smaller print. So it appears the title of the sermon is “What the world needs now is ... Darrell Johnson.”

Believe me: when I first thought about the title I was not thinking such an audacious thought! I can imagine that some of you saw the sign, and thought to yourself, or even said to your friends, What is happening to our pastor? First the title two weeks ago, “The Greatest Sermon Even Preached”, and now, “What the World Needs Now is ... Darrell Johnson”. We know he has been carrying a heavy load the past year or more: is he losing it?

I choose the title to play off the 1965 hit song, “What the World Needs Now...”

“What the world needs now, is love sweet love,
that’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.
What the world needs now, is love sweet love,
not just for some, but for everyone.”

Now, although Jesus does not say it in just those words, He does agree with the basic truth of the song.

“God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son ...”

“As the Father has loved Me, so I love you.”

“Love the Lord your God with all you are.”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

“Love your enemies.”

What the world needs now is love ... lots of love ... courageous love.

But in light of what Jesus says in the text of the Sermon on the Mount we just read, the accidental, apparently audacious title on the sign at the corner of Nelson and Burrard in this world-class city is ... well ...

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks audaciously. He speaks audaciously of Himself. “Truly I say to you.” No appeal to any higher power. Just, “truly I say to you.” Indeed, setting Himself over against, and above, all others who claim to understand the real world. “You have heard it was said, but I say to you.” Six times: “You have heard it said, but I say to you.”

“Blessed, right-on, are those who are persecuted because of Me.”

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ ...”

“Whoever hears these words of Mine and does them ...”

Who is this “I”? Who is this “Me, My, Mine”? Who is this Person Who lays out a fuller vision of what it means to be human, and grounds it all in Himself? Who is this Man who speaks in a way no one else ever has? Who is this Who speaks as if He were the Lord of the universe? Who is this Who speaks as if He were the Living God in the flesh? The Sermon on the Mount poses the most important question anyone can ever ask: Who is Jesus? Who is this Who humbly speaks so audaciously?

And in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also speaks of His followers audaciously. This is what He is doing in the text before us today. He Who speaks audaciously about Himself speaks audaciously about those He calls to Himself! He Who makes such audacious claims about Himself, makes hugely audacious claims about His followers, about His disciples, about us! “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.”

It seems to me that the only person about whom Jesus should make such claims is Himself. Given Who He is, it would make perfect sense for Him to say of Himself, “I am the salt of the earth; I am the light of the world.” And He does say that ... later in His ministry. “I am the Light of the world; whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

BUT here, in the Sermon on the Mount, in the greatest sermon ever preached, the greatest Preacher Who ever lived, says to those He has gotten hold of. “You ... you ... you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world. Put yourself in the place of those who first heard Jesus speak so audaciously. Ordinary folk. None listed in “Who’s Who in Palestine.” None of them occupying high ranking positions in the Roman Empire. None of them holding significant offices in the Jewish religious establishment. Ordinary people. Actually, a rather ragamuffin bunch.

Yet, something was happening to them. They were being changed ... slowly ... but surely. Jesus had announced His good news to them, His Gospel. “The time if fulfilled,” He said, “and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15; Matthew 4:17). On a mountain by the Sea of Galilee, He was beginning to spell out the life-transforming implications of this good news. He was describing what happens when people repent, turn around, and embrace Him and His Gospel. He was describing the new kind of humanity that begins to emerge: poor in spirit, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers. Beatitude people.

And then looking at that rag-tag, being-transformed gathering, He says: “You ... you whom I have called to Myself ... you whom I called ‘Blessed,’ ... you upon whom the Reign of God has come .. you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of the world.”

I am told that the Romans had a saying at that time. “There is nothing more useful than salt and sun.” In Latin, “sale et sole.” “There is nothing more useful than sale et sole, salt and sun.” Jesus is saying to that crowd of ordinary people: “There is nothing more useful

than you, you citizens of the in-breaking kingdom of heaven. You are salt and light. You are the salt the earth needs. You are the light the world needs.” Audacious. And amazing. The earth, the world can get along without a lot of things. But according to Jesus, the earth, the world cannot get along without Beatitude people.

Every Palestinian home, however rich or poor, needed both salt and light. John Stott suggests that “during his own boyhood Jesus must often have watched his mother use salt in the kitchen and light the lamps when the sun went down. Salt and light are indispensable household commodities” [*Christian Counter-Culture*, 58] What an audacious claim!

You ... you are the salt ... not only of your kitchens ... but of the earth!

You ... you are the light ... not only of your home ... but of the world ... of the cosmos!

As my friend Dale Bruner says, Jesus is bestowing on us “cosmic significance”.

In using these two metaphors – salt and light – Jesus is telling us how He views human society, then and now. In using these two metaphors Jesus is revealing His perspective on what is happening around the world and in our city. Specifically, Jesus is revealing His understanding of:

- (I) the condition of human society left to itself;
- (II) the role Beatitude people play in human society;
- (III) the way Beatitude people are to fulfill that role.

Consider each of these perspectives one at a time.

- (I) *First, Jesus’ use of the salt and light metaphors reveals His assessment of the condition of human society left to itself.*

Left to itself. Which, as I have pointed out on other occasions, is what the world wants. The word “world” - literally, “cosmos” - refers to “human society organizing itself without God.”

Psalm 2.

“Why are the nations in an uproar, and why are the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together, against Yahweh and His Messiah: ‘Let us tear their fetters apart, And cast away their cords from us’.”

“World” wants to be “left to itself.” And in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals what happens when we are left to ourselves.

Most of us mainly use salt to enhance taste. A pinch of salt adds zest to otherwise plain food. But in the 1st century, and for centuries up until the advent of refrigeration, salt was used to preserve food. Salt was absolutely essential to keep food, especially meat, from spoiling. Do you see where Jesus is going with the metaphor? Human existence, human society, left to itself, has a tendency to spoil, to rot. Left to itself it runs down, it deteriorates, it decays. Not very flattering, is it? Positively offensive, actually. But that is how Immanuel, the Creator-in-our-flesh assess the world left to itself.

Fifty years ago, people would have laughed at Jesus; 50 years ago we were riding the crest of amazing progress. Philosophers, politicians, scientists, even theologians (!) spoke in grand and glorious terms of “the ascent of man.” Humanity was marching triumphantly toward the realization of paradise on earth. But now? Very few speak that way now. Yes, we have made tremendous advances in technology and medicine, for which I am very grateful. Things go faster, they are bigger, stronger, more colorful. Yet. Yet ... something is terribly wrong. Where have we gone morally, relationally, intellectually, spiritually?

“Left to itself” “world” tends to run down. And, like meat, “world” needs something from outside itself to slow and halt the downward inertia. The key phrase is “left to itself.” The inertia toward decay is the consequence of humanity’s basic mistake: our decision to “go it alone,” to create our own world apart from the Living God. When we leave God out of the equation, the whole thing begins to unravel, to dis-integrate. And the world cannot stop itself from going bad.

I do not like to talk in this way. I do not want to face this fact of life. Those of you who know me well, know that I want to believe in the basic goodness of humanity. But Jesus is making us face the facts: left to ourselves, we, like meat, spoil.

Jesus reveals even more by using the metaphor of light. Human society left to itself tends to go dark. Human civilizations lose their way. (I am reading Nial Ferguson’s “Civilizations”.) We take turns in the road, leading us into even deeper darkness. Our thinking gets muddy. “Wrong” is “right” as long as it feels good. And “right” becomes “old fashioned.” And we become vulnerable to the latest fads. And we run to the slightest flicker of light that promise healing and warmth. And we call those periods of history when God is moved out of the centre of life “Enlightenment.” “Left to itself” the world cannot stop itself from going dark.

Again, I do not like talking this way. It is so sad. And so offensive, I know. But it is the way it is.

Now, the good news is that God does not leave the earth, the world, to itself! The Lord of the universe intervenes and provides salt and brings light. And to everyone’s surprise, the salt and light turn out to be ordinary, broken people, whom Jesus calls to Himself.

(II) *Which brings us to the second perspective on human society Jesus reveals in His use of the two domestic metaphors.*

The metaphors reveal the role Beatitude people play in a world that tends to decay and darken. It is a “double role” (John Stott). Arrest and dispel. As salt to arrest, or at least hinder, social decay. As light to dispel, and even drive back, prevailing darkness.

Arrest and dispel. As fishermen rub salt into their fish to preserve them,

so the Savior of the world rubs His followers into fabric of society to preserve it. As a candle or flashlight reveals the obstacles in the way and illumines the path before us, so the Savior of the world places His followers in every sector of life to reveal the stumbling-blocks and to point the way toward the True Light. Which is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer could say during the Nazi reign: “In casting out the disciples [of Jesus] the earth is destroying its very life.” [*The Cost of Discipleship*, 129].

Audacious, I know. But it is what Jesus is saying. The disciples of the Incarnate God are antiseptic to social decay and a lighthouse to those walking in the darkness. Which suggests to me that the welfare of any city is directly related to the health of the church in the city. When Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, having lamented that the city did not know “the things that make for peace,” He did not go to Herod’s palace. He made a beeline for the Temple. For the real problem was not Herod, or the Romans. The real problem lay with the people of God. So He heads for the Temple...to cleanse the Temple. For as the Temple goes, so goes the city. As the church goes, so goes the city.

Work with Jesus’ metaphors a bit longer. Each opens up more of the role Beatitude people play in the world.

Salt.

- Salt preserves, enhances flavor, and quickens thirst.

So Beatitude people. Preserves. We are placed in our sectors of the city to keep our sectors from spoiling. More concretely: you are placed in your sector of this city to keep your sector from spoiling. I am placed in my sector of this city to keep my sector from spoiling. As one commentator puts it: we are “moral disinfectant.” [RVG Tasker, *The Gospel of Saint Matthew*, 63].

- Salt also enhances flavor. We are placed in our spheres of life to give it zest. Something about the way we speak and act is to bring freshness to other people’s lives. Most people live lives of quiet desperation. Beatitude people are salt of hope and peace and joy. Help us Lord!

When I evaluate how effective I am in this role, especially in my family, I think of what Oliver Wendell Holmes once said: “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I know had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.”

Pardon the offense to any undertakers in the room.

- And salt creates thirst. Salty food makes us thirsty. Salty followers of Jesus make people thirsty for Jesus. We are to so live in our spheres in the city that people want what we have. “Why do you have such hope? Why do you treat us with such kindness? Why is it that the tragedy you just experienced has not robbed you of joy?”

Light.

- Light illumines, and guides, and pushes back the darkness. So Beatitude people. Illumines. Like a candle in a dark room. The mere presence of the poor in spirit, the

pure in heart, the merciful, illumines the darkness. Sometimes this will be welcomed, sometimes not. Either way, Beatitude people function as the Light of the world Himself does: illuminating, in the words of James Boice, “dishonest practices in business, gossip in the secretarial [and executive] pool, loose talk and still looser morals at parties, corruption in politics, racial prejudice, greed, selfishness” ... on it goes. [James M. Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 81]

And positively, illuminating the presence of the Living God, illuminating God’s acts of mercy and judgment, illuminating the open hands that graciously welcome prodigal children home.

- Light also guides. Beatitude people are placed in various sectors of the city to guide those sectors into truth. We are to model a new way of living. Something about the way we work, something about the way we speak, something about the way we treat others, leads people out of the darkness and into God’s healing light.
- And light pushes back. Pushes back the darkness. Pushing back the lies that keep people in bondage. Pushing back the illusions that cause despair and hopelessness. At the poster says: “It does little to curse the darkness; one should light a candle.” Audacious. Really, really audacious. “You are the salt of the earth.” “You are the light of the world.”

I think you can see then – feel –that many of us have been asking the wrong question about what is happening in the world? Especially about what is happening in the Western world once overtly influenced by the Gospel. As Western society has disintegrated we ask, “What has gone wrong with the world?” We point the judging finger at the unbelieving world. But ought not the question be, “Where is the church?” Ought not the finger be pointed at the church, at us? When meat goes bad, you do not blame the meat. You ask, “where was the salt?” When a room goes dark, you do not blame the room. You ask, “where was the light?”

A number of years ago, I had the privilege of knowing Keith Phillips, founder of an inner city ministry called World Impact. In his book, *They Dared to Love the Ghetto*, Keith asks:

“Why are the inner cities of America deteriorating so rapidly?
 Why do we have armed guards in our inner city schools?
 Why are there bars over the windows in so many private residences?
 Why are the elderly afraid to walk to the store or to the mailbox?
 The easy answer is to blame the violence, loneliness and hurt of the ghetto on sin. This answer is correct, but only partially. There is a more convicting answer and it involves the church of Jesus Christ ... The evangelical church has run from the inner city. In fact it has galloped!” (8-9).

When Jesus’ people abandon the inner city what do we expect? The city has lost its salt; the city has lost its light. “You are the salt, you are the light.” Do not run from the city!

The inner cities of the world are, of course, not the only “ghettos” abandoned by the church. What about entertainment, media, politics, higher education? Thank God for

those of you in those sectors. But we need more. Right? During past weeks I had a number of conversations with Christian leaders in our city. And I am freshly encouraged. Something is stirring. Something very significant!!

(III). Which brings us to the third perspective Jesus reveals in His use of the two domestic metaphors. Jesus shows Beatitude people how to best fulfill their role on the earth, in the world. The two metaphors help us avoid extremes.

- On the one hand, we are to resist the tendency to “turn inward,” and become solely pre-occupied with our own spiritual well-being. Jesus says: “*A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead they put it on a lamp-stand.*”

I think He also says: “Salt is of little value sitting in the salt shaker.” Salt must be shaken out of the container ... into the meat. Where it dissolves. Indeed, the salt must dissolve in order to check decay and enhance flavor.

- On the other hand, we are to resist the tendency to accommodate ourselves to the surrounding culture. Salt checks decay and enhances flavor because it is different. Jesus says: “*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 under foot.*” How many churches in the cities of the world are ignored by the city because the city sees nothing different in them? The city sees only a mirror image of itself: people treat each other the way the city does; they argue the way the unredeemed do; they speak harshly and judgmentally the way everyone else does. D. Marty Lloyd-Jones put it this way:

“The glory of the Gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world she invariably attracts the world.” [*Sermon on the Mount*, 41]

So in order to play the role Jesus intends us to play we have to resist the extremes: either becoming a “holy huddle,” or becoming “inoffensive culture pleasers.” The title of one of Richard Mouw’s books says it best: *Holy Worldliness*. In the world ... but not of it.

“*Let your light shine before others in such a way that they see your good works and glorify your Father.*”

The word for “good” refers to the inherent attractiveness of a thing. [Dale Bruner, 164] Let the inherent attractiveness of your works shine. Salty works. Light-radiating works.

We are to be outposts of the in-breaking Kingdom of God. Advance-parties of God’s new world order.

And we play the role Jesus intends us to play simply by being who we are in Him. Bonhoeffer pointed out that Jesus does not say, “you have salt, you have light.” Nor did Jesus say, “you should be salt, you should be light.” Jesus said, “you are salt, you are light.” Be who you are. Be who I am making you to be.

How? Well, ask: how did we become what Jesus says we are? By virtue of contact with Him. By virtue of His claim upon our lives. By virtue of Him causing His kingdom to invade our lives. We are slowly, but surely, becoming the new humans He brings into being.

The poor in spirit, those who know they have not arrived, who know they are powerless.. It is those who mourn over human brokenness and injustice, those who are gentle, those who hunger and thirst for right-relatedness...who know how to make peace.

Which says to me that we best play the role in the world Jesus intends us to play by staying close to Him. Surprised? We become salty because He salts us with Himself. We shine because He shines His light on us, and into us. A little girl visited a beautiful Cathedral with her mother. As she watched the sunshine beaming through the windows, she asked her mother, “who are those people in the windows?” “They are saints,” the mother replies. To which the little girl responded, “Now I know what saints are: they are people who let the light shine through them.” [Owe to Stephen Olford].

For the sake of the city, which left to itself decays and darkens, we must stay close to Him Who is the earth’s true salt and the world’s true light. “Abide in Me, and I in you ... and you will bear much fruit.”

What the world needs now is ...

I say: what the world need now is Jesus. Right? What the world needs now is Jesus. But what does Jesus say? It turns out that the sign on the corner of Nelson and Burrard accidentally got it right. As audacious as it appears, it turns out to be “right-on”. What the world needs now is ... me. What the world needs now is ... you.

According to the Lord of the universe, what the world needs now is for me to be all that Jesus says I am. According to the Lord of the universe, what the world needs now is for you to be all that Jesus says you are. What the world needs now is for citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven to, first and foremost, be citizens of the Kingdom of heaven! “You ... you ... you. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.”

So for the sake of the city He loves, let us resolve to be who the Lord of the city says we are. Will you now take a moment, and respond to two questions.

- One, as I have been speaking, what has Jesus been saying to you about the role He wants you to play in your sphere, where you live and work?
- Two, if money were no object, and you knew you could not fail, what “good work” would you like to be part of at this time in your life?

[If you do not mind, would you now turn to one or two others and share how you answered those questions]

Let me now pray the way Mother Teresa prayed
in response to what Jesus says in His Sermon on the Mount.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul with your spirit and life. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of yours. Shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me, but only you, O Lord! Stay with me, and then I shall begin to shine as you shine; so to shine as to be a light to others.

The light O Lord will be all from you; none of it will be mine; it will be you, shining on others through me. Let me praise you in the way you love best, by shining on those around me.

Let me preach you without preaching, not by words but by example, by the catching force of the sympathetic influence of what I do, the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to you.

Amen.

