

Sermon Transcript
September 30, 2012



Kingdom Life is an Influential Life
Salt and Light
Matthew 5:13-16

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 30, 2012, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church web-site at www.wethefc.com.

Scripture Text
Matthew 5:13-16

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Introduction

Rabbi Jesus said to his disciples: *“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.”*

I must confess, that I can’t read these words of Jesus without be transported back to my childhood. I can’t read these words without hearing the children’s song “This Little Light of Mine” playing in the back recesses of my mind. “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Hide it under a bushel? No! I’m going to let it shine. Hide it under a bushel? No! I’m going to let it shine. Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!”

Here is the scene that comes to my mind when I am taken back to my childhood where this song is playing in the back of my mind. We are in an outdoor pavilion in a wooded area that was called “The Grove.” It was a piece of property that the church owned beyond the far edge of the parking lot and among other events held there, every summer Child Evangelism Fellowship would hold a annual event called “Five Day Clubs.” The lady who ran this event was known as “Sergeant Jean.” The title says it all! She carried a big whistle around her neck and you didn’t mess with “Sergeant Jean,” especially when she blew that whistle. Everyday, for five days, she would tell “the missionary story” that would unfold scene by scene as the week progressed. Often we would follow that story with the song, “This Little Light of Mine.” And so, for me, the song “This Little Light of Mine” was a missionary song. So when I would sing - “Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!” - I would automatically think I had to go tell people about Jesus like the missionaries did. Now no doubt, that is part of letting your light shine. But I don’t think that is the main thrust of what Jesus is saying here.

So what is Jesus saying to us when he says that we are “salt and light” in this world? Now remember, we are looking at the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 4, we saw that with coming of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God was at hand. It was near. It has come in the person of Jesus. And so in this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is telling us what life in the kingdom of God looks like. When Jesus says that citizens of God’s kingdom are “*salt of the earth*” and “*light of the world*” what he is saying is that citizens of God’s kingdom are good for this world. He is saying that kingdom life is an influential life. We are people of influence.

As soon as I say that, I immediately feel a tension rise up within me that causes me to question whether or not that is true. Is it true to life? Are we really making influence in this world? I don't know about you, but I am prone to call into question whether or not that is really true. Do we really have influence for good in this world?

Take the cultural scene for example. If anything, it seems as though the church, the kingdom of God, is losing influence in our culture. It might even be safe to say that we can raise the white flag and concede the fact that we have already lost the cultural war. I don't mean to sound pessimistic this morning, but I as I read it, it is only a matter of time and gay marriage will be the law of the land. The definition of the family will be redefined and it will have all kinds of ramifications on what is tolerable and acceptable. In Quebec, Canada, where marriage has already been redefined, the government has already pursued policy that not only seeks to stamp out what they call "homophobia" but they have expanded their reach to address what is now called "heterosexism." Heterosexism is the belief that "heterosexuality is the social norm."¹ Jennifer Roback Morse, head of the Ruth Institute, which promotes life long marriage between a man and woman, responded to the thought of "heterosexism" by saying, "Look. Heterosexuality is normal in our species. We are a species that propagates by sexual reproduction. If the government gives itself the power to wipe out a belief that is actually true, what that means is that the government has given itself a blank check to do whatever it wants."² It is in areas like this where I think the final beatitude is going to be realized for God's people in this culture. "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" So where is the evidence of "the salt" and "the light?" Where is the influence of God's kingdom in this world and in our western culture?

You can even take this issue and remove it from the cultural scene and bring it into the battle that wages inside your own heart. The assertion is that the kingdom of God produces citizens of the kingdom who have influence for good in this world. And yet, here is the posture I see most Christians taking. I find us to be standing more and more in the defensive posture than in one of offense. Let me put it this way. We are struggling with the issue of being "influenced" by the world, when in reality, by the power of the Spirit we should be making "influence" on those around us. This tension is nothing new. It is talked about often in the New Testament. In Romans 12:1-2, we are told not be conformed by this world but to be transformed. In other words, don't be influenced, but be an influence. In Ephesians 4:22-23 it is said this way: "*put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*" This same thing is said over and over again throughout the New Testament. And yet, I am finding many Christians swimming in the mire or their sin and not getting victory. We are far more

influenced by what is around us, than being influenced by the kingdom of God that is in us. So how can we even be “salt and light?” Is it true that people of the kingdom of God are good for this world? Is it true that we are people of influence? How can it be so when we ourselves are more influenced by what is around us than what is in us?

Can you appreciate the tension I raise this morning? Do you know this tension inside of you this morning? The song “This Little Light of Mine” sure is a cute little song, but what Jesus is talking about here is far more than a cute children’s song. He is making the assertion that people of the kingdom of God are good for this world. If the kingdom of God resides in you, you are influential for God’s glory in this world. I am just asking the question, “Is it true?”

This morning, I want to first of all affirm what Jesus says is true about us if the kingdom of God resides in our hearts. Secondly, I want to show how God influences this world for good through us. And then finally, I want to encourage you and show you where the kingdom of God is shining through you and making influence for good and for God.

You are Salt and Light

The first thing I want to do is simply take Jesus at his word. This is what Jesus said about “Kingdom Life.” Jesus said, “*You are the salt of the earth.*” He said, “*You are the light of the world.*” These are statements of being. This is who we are as citizens of the kingdom. So what is Jesus saying about us by calling us “salt” and “light”?

First of all, Jesus uses the metaphor of salt to describe our place in the world. Salt was a valuable commodity in the ancient world. It was so valuable that often it was used as a medium of exchange in the trading business throughout the Mediterranean Sea. It was also used as a preservative on meat to keep it from spoiling. They didn’t have refrigerators and so the salt rubbed into the meat or fish would slow down the decaying process and preserve it. Salt is also necessary to our diets. It was also used for fertilizer when applied to certain types of soil. And so the question we face when we come to this statement is, “which use for salt did Jesus have in mind when he called us “*salt of the earth.*” Is he saying that we act like a preservative, keeping this world from being as bad as it could be? That is how D. A. Carson interprets this verse. He writes, “apart from his disciples the world turns even more rotten: Christians have the effect of delaying moral and spiritual putrefaction.”³ That may be the point. Let me suggest something else.

There was a prolific Roman writer who lived during the time of Jesus and his name was Pliny. In one of his writings he made the comment that “there is nothing more useful

than salt or sunshine.”⁴ Now whether Jesus had this common comment in mind when he said that we are “*salt of the earth*” we don’t know. But I wonder, if instead of trying to narrow down this metaphor to one specific use of salt if Jesus didn’t have a more broader meaning in mind what he called us “*salt of the earth.*” And so the point, I think, Jesus is making here is that just as salt is generally necessary and useful for life, so we are to the welfare of this world. Michael Wilkins puts it this way, “We are now different from the people of this earth, and our presence is necessary as God’s means of influencing the world for good.”⁵ As “salt” in this world, we are necessary to what God is doing in this world. I don’t use the word “necessary” lightly. I don’t mean to imply that God can’t get along without us. He can. But nonetheless it is a strong word that indicates that we are the means God has chosen to bring good to this world. We are “*salt of the earth.*” We are necessary to the work God is doing to bring his kingdom to this world. I affirm what Jesus says. We are of influence for good in this world.

The second metaphor Jesus uses to describe his disciples and the influence we have in this world is the word “*light.*” Jesus said of us, “*You are the light of the world.*” On one hand, I think Jesus is making the same point with “*light*” that he did with “*salt.*” It is another way of asserting the claim that we have influence for good in this world. But I wonder with the word “*light*” if he isn’t using even a stronger picture to talk about the kind of influence we have in this world as people of the kingdom.

When the Bible talks about “*light*” and “*darkness*” it speaks to the realm of good and evil, the realm of God and Satan. In Acts 26:18, Paul is telling his story of conversion and calling and he tells King Agrippa what Jesus said to him. Jesus said to Paul, “*I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.*” It is the same thing we read in Colossians 1:13, “*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*” Again, we see it in 1 Peter 2:9, “*that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.*”

We know that Jesus declared himself to be the light of the world. He said in John 8:12, “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*” I have no problem giving Jesus the title of “Light of the World.” We believe that Jesus is the answer to life. We believe you will never fully be satisfied in the inner parts of your life until you come to peace with God through Jesus. There is no other way to atone for your sin than through Jesus. It is through Jesus that one moves from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. There is no other way to be reconciled to God than through Jesus. But now notice what Jesus says about us. He didn’t say we were “carriers of the light.” He said, we too “*are the light of the world.*”

It is what Paul said of us in Ephesians 4:8-9, “Walk as children of the light, for the fruit in life is found in all that is good and right and true.” Paul said in Philippians 2:14-15, “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

We are not just good for this world. We are God’s chosen means by which God is dispelling darkness in this world. “You are the light of the world.” As residents of God’s kingdom, we have influence in this dark world. God is using us to bring light to this world and to move people from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. It may seem at times that we have very little influence. Some of you say to me, somewhat exasperated, “I have been trying to be a light at work or in my family but it doesn’t seem like it is making any difference.” But don’t doubt what Jesus has declared to be true about us. We are the light of the world. God is dispelling darkness in this world through the people of his kingdom. Kingdom Life is an influential life. We are salt! We are light!

Savory Salt and Bright Lights

Now that we have established the fact that we are “salt and light” in this world, the question is how? How do we become “savory salt” and how do we shine as “bright lights” in this world? What we are really asking is this. How do we become people of influence for the kingdom of God in this world? Remember, we questioned whether or not it was true. We questioned whether or not we were really having influence in this world for the good. But the words of Jesus challenges our question and says we are having influence. We are “savory salt” and we are “bright lights.” How so?

Well you can’t answer this question without noticing what these words are attached to. The claim that we are “salt” and “light” flows out of what we looked at last week when we looked at the Beatitudes. In fact, most commentaries view these two passages as one complete package statement. I think appropriately so. It is very instructive as to what Jesus means when he calls us “salt” and “light.” When the Beatitudes begin to shape who you are inside and when the Spirit of God begins to change your life, you become “savory salt” and “bright lights” in this world. People can’t help but notice. I like the way Piper puts it, “Here is a kind of identity that is very unusual in the world. It is like savory salt when things are tasteless and flat, and it is like hope-filled light when people are stumbling around in the dark.”⁶ That is what you are like in this world when the Beatitudes shine through your life.

Lets just rehearse the Beatitudes this morning. As we do, lets remind ourselves that this

is what God is forming inside our hearts. As God works this change in us, we become salt and light.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

This means that you live a life in humble dependence upon God.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

This means that you are aware of your own sin and therefore are humble towards others around you.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

This means you do not think too highly of yourself and consider others better.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

This means that you live to please God and you love what God loves.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

This means that you have a heart of compassion for the one in need and you work towards forgiving those who have hurt you.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Your faith is genuine and it marks you when no one else is around.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

We point people to Jesus and we work towards reconciling relationships.

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

We are willing to stand up for Jesus and for what is right in this world even if it means we face opposition and harm.

As these kingdom norms are formed to your heart, it is inevitable. You will be “savory salt” and you will be “bright lights” in this world. That is the point Jesus is getting at when he says, *“but if salt has lost its taste how shall its saltiness be restored?”* It is kind of a tricky statement because salt never actually loses its saltiness. So there has been some debate as to what Jesus is actually saying here. I think he may be referring to a common proverb of his day, a statement that perhaps everyone was familiar with in the time of Jesus when they heard him say it.

There was a rabbi by the name of Rabbi Joshua ben Haninia who lived close to the time of Jesus. When he was asked a trick question, he would rebuff it by using a common proverbial statement, “Can salt lose its flavor?” He would couple it with “Does the mule bear young?”⁷ A mule was sterile and so the obvious answer was “no.” So it was with salt. It cannot lose its flavor. So what is Jesus saying when he says, *“if salt has*

lost its taste how shall its saltiness be restored?" He is saying that if God's kingdom has broken into your life and is changing you from the inside out, then it is impossible for you to lose your saltiness in this world. If there is an internal reality to your faith, you are of influence in this world because people can't escape who you are and what you are becoming. Now, no doubt, there are those whose faith is merely external. There is nothing really inside. That will eventually amount to nothing. But for the one who has encountered Jesus and these kingdom norms are being formed in their lives, you can't help but be salt in this world. Your changed life is having an impact on those around you. True salt never ceases to be "savory salt."

It is the same thing Jesus is saying about being light in this 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."* Obviously, when Jesus made this statement he was speaking to a people who never experienced the power of electricity! I grew up in rural Pennsylvania and when it would get dark at night, it would really get dark. We didn't have street lights that lit up the night sky. But you could see a farm house off in the horizon with their lights on. Where the light shines, it is impossible to hide it. Light always shines through darkness. In fact, there is no purpose to covering light. This is especially true in a culture where light in the home was simply a small clay lamp with a wick on it. You would elevate it just to give light throughout the room. If the kingdom of God and these beatitudes have broken into your life through Jesus, you will shine in this world. You can't keep it from shining. Light always shines through darkness.

So how do I become "salt" and "light" to this world? I am "salt" and "light" in this world as God changes me on the inside. When that internal change happens, I can't help it. I am "salt" and I am "light." It is amazing to me, having now preached through the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, how much of it I am finding reinforced in the epistles. We already quoted these verses, but listen to them again. Listen to "how" we are light in this world. Paul says in Ephesians 4:8-9, *"Walk as children of the light, for the fruit in life is found in all that is good and right and true."* Paul said in Philippians 2:14-15, *"Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world."* How do I "shine" here? I don't grumble like everyone else. We shine as lights through the change God is forming in our hearts by his grace.

I want to stop here and say something that I just want to lay out there and let it sit. I am not going to spend a lot of time developing it. It is something that I hope becomes an outcome of InFusion and the conversation we will begin next month. The reason we are more influenced by the world outside of us than the kingdom of God inside of us is

because we are trying to shine our lights all by ourselves. We take the song too literally. “This LITTLE light of MINE!” Most of us, in the church in western society, are trying to shine our lights all by ourselves. I am convinced we shine brighter when we shine together. I don’t believe your light will shine in this world as it should if you are not connected into community where you are able to confess sin and gain accountability. That is why we are not the influence we can be. Christian Schwartz wrote a profound thought when he wrote, “It is impossible to overcome sin as long as we treat it in a purely individualistic way, outside the context of Christian community. The traditional ways of dealing with sin have primarily followed the individualistic path – an approach that has never worked and never can work. The cure for sinful patterns of behavior depends on learning what it means to think and act in “we” categories – as “we” that includes God, other people and ourselves”⁸ We need each other so that together we can make influence for the kingdom of God in this world.

Let Your Light Shine

Jesus concludes his thought by saying, “*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.*” In other words, let the kingdom norms, the Beatitudes, shine through your life through good works and through a life that displays the grace and love of God. When you do that, you are “salt” and “light.” You do have influence in this world for God and for good. It is a fact. Let me give you an example of this.

First of all, we began this morning by asking the question, “Is it true?” Do we as kingdom people have influence for good in this world? The reason we questioned this is because of what we see happening in our culture. If anything, it seems that we are having less of an influence in our culture and the social issues of the day seem to be turning for the worse. Could it be that we are measuring the influence of the kingdom of God in the wrong way.

It seems to me that the Christian community is in a state of panic and despair because we confuse the kingdom of God with politics. Listen to this commentary in a recent edition of *Christianity Today*.

“To sum up what we at *Christianity Today* have said before. We believe gays and lesbians should not be denied fundamental rights granted to every other American, nor should they suffer slurs or intimidation in any shape or form. Further, we continue to believe that marriage should be defined in our nation as a moral and legal bond between a man and a woman. For, among other reasons,

societies that fail to shape themselves by the most basic and universal of divine laws and institutions cannot have a happy future. This seems built into the very order of creation by our loving Creator.

Careful readers will notice that we do not get panicked or outraged when gay marriage sometimes gets the upper hand in the ebb and flow of national debate. As much as we want the state to recognize and protect traditional marriage, we're not depending on the state to do so. In fact, the state has already done plenty to undermine traditional marriage—no fault divorce law being perhaps the most egregious example. Since its advent in 1970, this policy has destabilized marriage like no other.”⁹

Is our being “salt” and “light” in this world dependent upon the laws of the land? Is our being influence for the kingdom dependent on the ebb and flow of public policy? *Christianity Today* concludes “Rather than put all our eggs in the basket of constitutional amendments or judicial opinion, we Christians would be wise to shore up marriage in our churches. Doing this would be both an act of repentance for our narcissism (for we Christians succumb to this temptation as much as the next sinner) and a witness to what marriage at its best can be.” Do you know what I like about that. They are saying the same thing Jesus said. “*Let your light shine!*” Your light shines in this world when you love your wife and love your husband as God calls you to. By virtue of living out the ideals of a Christian family your light is shining in your neighborhood and to your family.

Earlier I mentioned Jennifer Roback Morse, a woman who is a leading spokesperson for the preservation of marriage in our culture. When asked if she was pessimistic or optimistic about the way things are going, I thought she gave a profound answer. She said, “I don’t think in terms of optimism or pessimism. I think more in terms of theological hope. I try to cultivate the theological virtue of hope, of being hopeful that our Lord will use what is happening for the greatest good. If we are thankful to him and proclaim his truth in love, we hope that he will somehow use that for good. I don’t know exactly how, or how long it is going to take.”¹⁰

Do you know what she is saying? She is saying that she knows that as the kingdom of God shines through her, God will use her as salt and light in this world. Because that is what we are. Our job is to shine together and let the light of Christ shine through us. God will take that and use it for his good. It is not bound by the laws of the land. In fact, when I look at history, here is what I observe. It seems that the light of the kingdom of God shines brightest when the laws of the land are the darkest. Don’t gage the influence of the kingdom of God by the laws of the land. Gage it by the brightness

of light that shines from God's people as we humble ourselves before God, each other and the world. Do not grow weary in well doing. You are salt. You are light. Shine!

Conclusion

Here is the journey I am on and inviting you to. How do we form communities that merge our individual lights in such a way that help us shine brighter together? How do we form communities where we are able to see victory over sin in our lives and consequently have influence for the kingdom of God? How do we form communities where those outside the kingdom of God can come in and witness the genuine transformation of life and therefore move from darkness to light? I am asking God to form that in us so that we can be the "savory salt" and the "bright light" in increasing measure for the glory of God. I can't wait to see what he does.

¹Marcia Segelstein "To Make a Family - An Interview with Jennifer Roback Morse" in *Salvo* Issue 22, Fall 2012, 28

²*Ibid.*, 28

³D. A. Carson *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978) 30

⁴Michael Wilkins *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 213

⁵*Ibid.*, 213

⁶John Piper *What Jesus Demands From the World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006) 357

⁷Wilkins, 214

⁸Christian Schwarz *The Three Colors of Community* (Natural Church Development, 2012) 15-16

⁹"More Than a Legal Issue" in *Christianity Today* July/August 2012 p. 81

¹⁰Segelstein, 28