

Sermon on the Mount

Message 4

Jesus' Kingdom Encounters the World

Matthew 5:11-16

Conflict

When I was a child one of my heroes was General George Patton, Commander of the U.S. Third Army in Europe in World War II. Patton was a real tough guy, who whipped his men into tip-top shape and led them on impossible missions. My favorite story was Patton's pivotal role in the Battle of the Bulge. This took place when the Germans launched a surprise counter-offensive after the Allies thought they were incapable of significant resistance. On December 16, 1944 the German army drove deep into Allied territory and inflicted terrible casualties on the Allied divisions. General McAuliffe's troops in Bastogne took the brunt of the German attack. They refused to surrender, but could barely hang on. Patton's third Army was south of the fighting in the Ardennes Forest, but was called to supply reinforcements. Driving at top speed, without stopping, through the night, Patton's troops astonished everyone by arriving in time to relieve the beleaguered Allies and reverse the course of the battle. What began as a great German victory ended as the decisive defeat for the Third Reich.

Conflict is an inevitable part of life. Ever since Cain killed Abel, people have been at odds with each other, and often this takes an ugly turn. When kingdoms and nations are involved, the conflict is simply on a larger scale. We have been looking at the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' vision of his Kingdom and have discussed the character of this Kingdom as revealed in the Beatitudes. Tonight we will look at what happens when Jesus' Kingdom encounters the world around it.

The Kingdom and the World

In our study of the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-10, we saw that they began by showing how one gets out of the world and into the Kingdom – by poverty of spirit. Those, and only those, who recognize their sin and admit that they are incapable of pleasing God can enter Jesus' Kingdom. The beatitudes ended by showing what happens when the Kingdom gets back into the world – persecution. When followers of Jesus rub shoulders with those who don't believe the gospel, they will experience the animosity of the world. Both the first and last beatitude promise ownership of the Kingdom as the blessing, "for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Poverty of spirit is the entrance requirement, and persecution is the badge of authenticity. Because the certainty of persecution is such a hard idea to accept, Jesus goes on to explain it and elaborate on the relationship between the members of His Kingdom and those in the world.

When the Kingdom encounters the world around it, two things happen to it and two things happen to the world. The Kingdom experiences persecution and joy, and the world is preserved and enlightened.

Why do people fight? What brought about World War II? Adolf Hitler's goal was for Germany to rule the world. If we all had shared that goal, there would have been no war. France, Britain, the United States, and other nations peacefully would have turned over control to Germany. The war broke out because other nations had different values and goals. Likewise, there would be no conflict between the Kingdom of God and the world if there were no difference between them. If we had the same pursuit of self-interest and personal gain we would fit right in. But as long as Jesus' Kingdom is different, there will be persecution.

However, persecution is not a dismal prospect, for it holds the promise of joy. At first hearing this seems a crazy idea. Who but a masochist would take pleasure in being persecuted? Persecution brings rejoicing because it places us in the company of the apostles and prophets. Wouldn't you consider it a great honor to have your biography contained in a book chronicling the lives of great men? As you turn from page to page you read about Moses, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Martin Luther, Napoleon, George

Patton... and Josh Callen! Jesus says that when we are persecuted we are placed in the line-up of the greats. But even better, you will receive a reward for our troubles. You must wait until you get to heaven to receive it, but it is surely there. Furthermore, you should rejoice in persecution because it proves that you are really part of the Kingdom and not an imposter. Rejoice when you are persecuted, for persecution puts you in the company of the greats, carries the promise of reward, and is your badge of authenticity!

So when Jesus' Kingdom encounters the world it experiences persecution for opposing the world's goals and values. But rather than causing despair, this brings about rejoicing in the Kingdom. The world also is affected by the conflict with Jesus' Kingdom. Jesus' followers have the effect of salt and light in the world.

The Salt of the Earth

It is difficult today to grasp the full impact of the salt metaphor. When beef is raised in Argentina, slaughtered in Chicago, sold in your neighborhood grocery store and is still as fresh as the hour it was killed, we lose sight of the necessity of preserving meat. But if you have ever encountered rotten meat, you have a vivid memory of the consequences of not preserving it. Before refrigeration, salt was the only way to keep meat from spoiling. Even today we appreciate some food preserved in salt. Every year for decades my grandfather, and now my father, would buy hundreds of hams and cure them for sale throughout the year. Hundreds of pounds of salt are mixed with sugar and other spices and carefully rubbed into the meat. After repeated applications over several weeks, the ham is hung up until ready to be consumed. The salt penetrates the meat and keeps it from spoiling, and it will be edible for years.

Salt is essential for life. For example, sodium is an essential element in the operation of cell membranes. Without sodium your cells would be unable to transport molecules in and out. You would die from the inside out. In the Middle Ages there were two kingdoms in West Africa, one which possessed gold mines, and the other which possessed salt mines. There was a flourishing trade between them, because the second desired gold, but the first could not survive without salt. Salt is so valuable, in Roman times the soldiers were even paid with it. I suppose that is the origin of the phrase, "He isn't worth his salt." The big concern, however, was to get pure salt. Salt is easily confused with sand, and sand is worthless. Worse, it can be harmful if sand is used in place of salt. If my father put sand on his hams, they all would rot. Salt is a vital preservative, but it is only effective when it thoroughly penetrates the food, and it is ineffective and dangerous when contaminated.

You are the salt of the earth. The world is in the process of decay. Sin is ruining the lives of people in the world and even the whole society. Sex outside of marriage is not simply another "lifestyle". It is a sin which destroys people and societies. Greed is not the engine of capitalism. It is a poison which ruins families and drives men to criminal behavior. Racism is not only one of the meanest attitudes, it erodes the vitality of a culture. Abortion kills off a vital part of the next generation and deadens the souls of those who engage in it. Sin ruins people and rots society. If God let the world to itself, we would destroy ourselves in a generation

But God did not leave the world to rot. He established His Kingdom in the midst of the world to preserve it. Just as salt preserves food, so Christians preserve the world. Notice that we are not commanded to be salt. *We are* salt. Those who follow Jesus *are* different. *We do* exercise a preserving influence on the world. The question is, how effective are we? If we do not taste salty, we are worthless, even dangerous. Just as sand may look like salt, yet fail to preserve the meat, so there may be people who look like believers, but do not act as believers. They will not exercise their vital task of preserving the world around them. Society will fall into further decay and their friends will languish in sin. Ultimately these imposters will be cast out and trampled, like sand.

Christians have their salty effect when they penetrate society and when they have a distinctive “taste.” They take all sorts of jobs, live in all sorts of neighborhoods, enlist in the military, and teach in the schools. Everywhere they go they live as described in the beatitudes. When they encounter sin and injustice, they take the side of righteousness. They challenge dishonesty in business and politics, promote sexual purity, and encourage benevolence to all people. Christians oppose slavery, abortion, racism, sexual immorality, cheating, theft, and greed. Some Christians may lobby for more righteous laws, but all must speak up whenever there is an opportunity to be a witness for righteousness. When AT&T calls to solicit my long-distance phone business, I do not merely say no. I take the opportunity to say that I do not support their endorsement of homosexual activity. I have been called at least a dozen times by AT&T representatives, and have received as many offers in the mail. Many have included a check for \$100, if I will sign up with them. But to do this is to become contaminated, and contaminated salt is worthless. Whatever we do, we must not remain silent or adopt the values of the world, lest we be thrown out of the Kingdom.

Salt stings in an open wound, but kills the contaminating bacteria. If we are to turn back the progress of sin, we will sting those around us. We will be accused of being puritanical, archaic, unloving, controlling, preachy, legislating morality, etc. And this is not a call to contentiousness. After all, we are peacemakers. Nor is this to say that all moral issues must be enforced by law. But in the face of such opposition we all naturally seek peace at any price, because we crave comfort for ourselves. However, unless people are cut to the heart, they will never change. War is dirty and painful, and we are at war with the world in order to change it. We will be persecuted, but in it all, we will be faithful to Jesus and will preserve the world. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said, “The glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first.”¹

Light of the World

Not only are the people in Jesus’ Kingdom salt to preserve the world, they are also light to brighten it. Society is dark. The world is black because of sin. Only righteousness lightens the world. This is why, speaking of the coming of Jesus, John in his gospel says that He was “the true Light which gives light to every man...” “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” (Jn 1:9,5) Furthermore, the world loves the darkness. John continues, “The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” (Jn. 3:19-20) When all of society is enslaved to sin, it is completely dark and there is no conflict with followers of Jesus. It is when the Kingdom of Jesus is present that conflict arises. Followers of Jesus are like a light shining on people and exposing their sinful acts. People like the sin they are doing, but hate being exposed.

Has your roommate ever come in and turned on the light after you had been in bed for awhile but were not yet asleep? Bright light shocks and blinds you when your eyes have become accustomed to the darkness. When I need to get something from the bedroom where the baby is sleeping, I will turn on the closet light instead of the overhead light. The closet door blocks out most of the light and doesn’t startle the baby, but enables me to avoid bruising my shins on the cedar chest. The effect of light is diminished by a cover.

When Christians try to reduce their conflict with the world, it is like covering the light. But Jesus calls us to shine brightly. Resist the temptation to seek comfort! Refuse to compromise! Boldly be who you are – children of the light. If we are followers of the Light, we will be lights as well. Paul picks up this image

¹ Quoted in John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture, The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (DownersGrove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978) p. 60.

in Philippians when he urges us to “become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world...” (2:15-16) Although men will initially hate us for exposing their evil deeds, eventually they will be grateful. As Lloyd Jones said, “when the church is absolutely different from the world she invariably attracts it...though [the world] may hate it at first.” Jesus said that when they see our good works they will “glorify your Father in heaven.”

How salty are you? How brightly do you shine? Are you obviously different from others around you without being weird? When you are among your peers, does your presence deter them from sinful behavior? When those around you engage in dark talk or activity, do you shine the gospel brightly into their midst? Do you look like a follower of Jesus? Can people see from your life that you are part of His Kingdom?

Eternal Reward

This has been a challenging message. Conflict is not easy, and we live in an age of ease. We seek faster computers, simpler meals, longer vacations, shorter assignments, and are not eager for unpleasant experiences. Who in his right mind would deliberately choose to live in such a way as to bring on persecution? No one – unless there were a big reward at the end and a big penalty for the easy path. Those soldiers in the Third Army suffered greatly in World War II, but the reward was the ability to live in peace and freedom. The other alternative was to become enslaved to a murderous madman. In this case, the only sane choice was to suffer the temporary discomforts of war and risk death to achieve a lasting benefit.

The same could be said for Jesus’ call to follow Him. Being salt and light in a sinful world is a tough challenge, but the pay-off is the Kingdom of Heaven. Remember those blessings in the beatitudes? Comfort, satisfaction, mercy, sons of God, the whole earth? What a list! What more could you want in this life? All these come with the Kingdom of Heaven. But your reward is also the life of your friends. I’m talking about the unbelievers around you. If you live like them, you may get along famously together – but you will not enlighten or preserve them. Do you want to come to the end of your life and realize that your friends will perish because they could not see Christ in you? You blended in so well that they were never challenged to think that their unbelief would have eternal consequences? But if you live like Christ while remaining friendly, your friendship will be rocky, but you may save them for eternity. So part of your reward for enduring persecution is the salvation of unbelievers. There are great blessings in Jesus’ Kingdom, but it is a package deal. Persecution comes with the blessings.

There is another encouraging aspect to this teaching. It works. Remember at the beginning we remarked that we are not commanded to be salt and light, for we *are* salt and light. The command is to resist the temptation to cover up our true nature. But if we resist this temptation, we will be salt and light. Jesus made us that way, and we *will* preserve and enlighten the world, if we do not compromise.

Do you have the guts to stand against the world? Can you bear up under persecution? Do you simply not have the heart for it? Remember, Jesus is the great heart surgeon. When you waver in your commitment to His Kingdom, ask Him to help you resist the temptation to compromise. Remember, God always gives good gifts to His children. You can count on Him to keep you salty and brightly shining in this dark and sinful world.

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