

Foundations: OUR INFLUENCE
Matthew 5:13-16 (AFBC 2/5/17)

Last Sunday, as we considered a final spiritual resolution for the new year, I encouraged us all to grow in Christ. For all who follow Him, that's a life-long pursuit—to become less of what we have been... and more of what Christ wants us to be.

We looked to the Beatitudes to help us with this. Jesus began His Sermon on the Mount with these eight ways to be blessed or happy or content in life. He did this by focusing on characteristics of the spirit--things like humility and mercy, purity and peace.

Sometime in the next few months, I plan for us to look at these qualities in a bit more depth. This morning, though, we're turning our attention to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes cover the first 12 verses of Matthew 5. The sermon then continues for two and a half additional chapters. These passages that will serve as our focus in worship starting today and continuing through Easter Sunday.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus talks about what His followers are to BE. In the rest of this Sermon, Jesus teaches us what we are to DO.

And this combination of being and doing is what leads to the abundant life our Lord promises to all of us who follow Him. So with that, let's look at **Matthew 5:13-16:**

13 "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.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 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. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

I was shocked and saddened some months back while looking through a few several-days-old newspapers—Pam and I had been out of town—and there in the obituaries was a photograph of my favorite high school teacher, Lamar Malphrus.

He taught 12th grade English, and I'm sure that I've mentioned him to you before. Mr. Malphrus ran his classroom like a drill sergeant—always demanding respect, and getting it!

You don't usually think of an English teacher as intimidating, but he was. Did I mention that he also coached football? Normally, English teachers coach golf or tennis or track, not football.

But rough and tough Mr. Malphrus, the football coach, also loved literature and writing. He would quote sonnets from Shakespeare. We would be studying some great composition, and he would "bring it to life" in front of us.

You see, the classroom was his stage! And we were his audience—a captive audience, granted—but most days, we didn't mind. He was good at this! Often he would have us write an interpretation of the poem, or the book or play that he had introduced to us in class.

And the next day, we'd better not come to class unprepared! If Mr. Malphrus asked us a question in class, we soon learned that it was far better to at least attempt an answer. The worst thing we could say is, "I don't know." Yes, I learned this the hard way.

"You don't know?!?" he snapped while glaring in my direction.
"Then, what are you good for?"

Well, what do you say to that? It was one of those rare moments when I chose to remain silent and be thought a fool rather than speak and remove all doubt!

Mr. Malphrus was tough, but he always had our best interest at heart—and he did us a world of good! He motivated us to do our best, to accomplish more than we ever had before. I'm glad I got around to thanking him a few years later, but I really regretted missing his funeral.

Now, **Jesus is all about helping you and me to become good people**—but by His definition, this always means that He wants us to be people **who are good... for something**—which brings us today to the second part of the Sermon on the Mount.

This first teaching after the Beatitudes has to do with our influence. My life and yours are supposed to affect the lives of others in some

positive way. Jesus explains this to us by talking about salt and light.

Jesus tells us that we are to be good for salt and we are to be good for light in this world. And if we're not, friends, sadly, we're good for nothing! Which sounds a lot like Mr. Malphrus did when he asked, "What are you good for?" Jesus challenges us to be good for salt and light.

To get at what Jesus means, it might help us to think about how salt is used. **We think of salt primarily as a seasoning.** In visiting with people who are in the hospital, you know the number one complaint I hear. It's not the pain they're going through, or their treatments, or medications, or even their loss of privacy.

What I hear most is "Preacher, they put me on a salt-free diet, and the food is awful!" Most of us only have this experience when someone forgets to salt the grits or green beans—but for some, it's all the time: no salt, so... no taste.

Jesus tells us that you and I are to be **"the salt of the earth."** So, is our Lord instructing us to bring flavor to the world about us?

There are plenty of things we can get into in this world—I'm talking now about things we shouldn't get into--that seem so "spicy-good" at first; but after a while, they begin to lose their flavor—or worse. They may leave a bitter taste in our mouths—and in our lives.

It's sad that so many people find life to be "distasteful." I suppose it could actually be a good thing if we found food a little boring at times—a bit less enticing; but we surely don't want *life* to be that way—and God doesn't want that for us either.

Our assignment as followers of Jesus is to bring flavor to life—to bear witness that life in Christ is good and satisfying—sort of like salt to our taste buds. Christ has the words of eternal life, and in Him, we find fullness of life and abundant joy. Christ tells us to flavor the world about us with the good things we have tasted in our relationship with Him.

Bland, joyless, tasteless Christians do damage to the cause of Christ in this world. Unfortunately, that's the image that too many people have of Christ and those who follow Him—and where do you suppose they get that from—from US, maybe? Where else—except us?

So our Lord tells us, **“You are the salt of the earth. Lose your flavor, and you’re good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled.”**

That’s exactly what so many people have done—they taste Christ by sampling the lives of those who claim to follow Him; and they say, “Thanks, but no thanks. I just don’t like the taste of that.”

When this happens, friends, the problem is not Christ—it’s us. We’re called to be salty--to flavor our world with the good things of God in Christ Jesus.

We should make it our aim to live our lives with such joy and fulfillment that when others get a taste of the Christian life from what they see in us, they’ll say, “I like that. I want more. I’ll never get tired of that!”

Let’s take this further. In Jesus’ day, **salt** had other important uses. For example, it was a **preservative. It kept things from “going bad.”** Most of us are familiar with the concept as it relates to country ham—salt-cured ham—don’t you just love it!

I do. Granted, it should be consumed in moderation—not only is it ham--which is not the healthiest thing in the world to eat—it’s salt-cured ham. Honestly, I’m not a big fan of plain ham, but country ham is one of my favorite things. And I know it’s because of the salt. I like that taste, don’t you?

Really, the only reason we have country ham today is because we like the taste of salt so much. Think about this: we have no reason to preserve ham with salt today, do we? That’s because we have refrigerators and freezers.

If we buy country ham today, it’s because we’re craving that salt. Well, I’ve said too much about this, but the point is that salt is both a seasoning and a preservative—and, because of this, it was far more important in Jesus’ day than in ours.

When Jesus’ disciples were still working as fishermen, one of the first things they would do after landing those fish was to cover them with salt. If they didn’t, the hot Palestinian sun would soon render those fish inedible—very smell-able, but in-edible.

Here’s the thing: **as followers of Christ, we are intended to have a preserving influence on the world around us.** Decay

is rampant. Standards are being lowered everywhere we turn—in business, government, schools, churches, the media. Our lives are increasingly self-obsessed, our discourse with one another is getting meaner and more crude, and it's like we're hardly even noticing the change! Or we just don't care.

If it was rotting fish, we would at least do something about it once we could no longer stand the smell! But when our sense of the common good, along with common decency are what's rotting away, when our ability to communicate with respect and courtesy is eroding, when ethical standards founded upon shared Judeo-Christian values are decaying, we shrug our shoulders, look the other way, and choose not to notice that something stinks!

That's not the way of Christ, friends. No one was more loving, gracious, and kind than Jesus. But there were times when Jesus was like salt poured into a wound. There were some people He intentionally irritated and infuriated to the point they finally decided that He had to go. They really believed that could neutralize all the things Jesus stood for and taught us to live by.

This is why Jesus told us to "BE SALT in this world." By our presence, our attitudes, our voices and our actions, we seek to preserve the sweet flavors of love and respect toward God paired with justice and compassion toward all God's children.

When necessary, though, he also told us to be salt that rubs rough and hard up against the wounds and decay caused by those who refuse to live by God's standards, and who try to pull us down to their level. Don't go there. Never go there, because you are a follower of Jesus Christ. You... are the salt of the earth!

And just in case we still didn't understand, Jesus added this: **"You are the light of the world!"**

How does that make you feel? When you hear Jesus saying this to you, do you feel trusted? Affirmed, maybe, or even complimented and empowered? Hopefully, we feel all of the above!

But we know it's not just about how we feel. Again, Jesus' sermon is focused here on how we're doing. How are you and I doing... at being salt and light for those around us—which means, of course, doing what salt and light are intended to do?

Current illustrations are always good, but some of the most powerful stories come from ancient Christian history—back when efforts to extinguish the light of Christ were far stronger than they are today. There were some very “bright lights” indeed among those early believers.

The church at Smyrna, one of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation, had a pastor named **Polycarp**. He had been mentored in the faith by the Apostle John. In many ways, he possessed the same tenderness and compassion as John.

Polycarp was Bishop in Smyrna when persecution broke out in that region. Many Christians were fed to wild animals in the arena. Before long, the crowd was calling for Polycarp’s life as well.

The authorities sent a search party to find him. Christian friends hid him for a while, but the Romans arrested two young believers and tortured them until they disclosed his location.

Polycarp still could have escaped; but he chose not to run, saying “God’s will be done.” Polycarp welcomed his captors as if they were his friends.

He talked with them graciously and insisted they join him for a meal. He made only one request before the soldiers took him away, that he be allowed to pray for one hour.

The soldiers agreed since they had been treated so kindly, and they even listened to his prayer. They were moved by the old bishop’s words. They began to have second thoughts about their orders--why they’d been sent to arrest this good man.

Other authorities, like the Judge in charge of his trial, were also impressed and tried to find a way to release him. “Curse God and I will let you go!” the Judge pleaded.

But Polycarp replied, “For eighty-six years I have served him. He has never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?”

The Judge continued to look for a way out. “Then do this old man--just swear by the spirit of the emperor--that will be sufficient.”

Polycarp replied: "If you imagine for a moment that I would do that, then I think you pretend that you don't know who I am. Hear it plainly," he said. "I am a Christian."

The judge tried other approaches, but Polycarp stood firm. The judge told him he would throw him to the lions.

"Bring them on," Polycarp replied. The judge finally threatened, "I will have you burned alive!"

But Polycarp answered: "You threaten me with fire that burns for an hour and is over, but the judgment on the ungodly is forever."

So Polycarp was burned at the stake. As the fires engulfed him, witnesses said his faith stayed strong and his joy was evident.

He was buried, a martyr for Christ, on February 22, 155 A.D. It was a terribly sad day for the church, yet fellow believers also saw it as a day of victory for Christ and for His servant, Polycarp.

Often the old bishop had reminded them of Jesus' words: "**What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?**"

Now, granted, it's hard for you and me to relate to such stories of the martyrs—thankfully, that's not the world we live in today—not us, at least.

Jesus Christ does not call many of us to literally DIE for Him; but He does call all of us to LIVE for Him—to be salt and light for Him—to serve as His witnesses.

Let's examine our lives today. What can we point to in our lives right now and say with conviction: "That's how I'm being the salt of the earth, and there is where I'm shining as a light in this world, for Christ's sake?"

Salt without flavor doesn't cut it, friends. Light under a bowl is useless. May we be salt that can be tasted and light that's seen.

In the words we speak, the actions we take, the priorities we set, and the convictions we stand on—let's make it our aim to be effective witnesses for Christ and positive influences on those around us, for Christ's sake.