

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 10, 2012**

**YOUR MISSION:
BEING A CHRISTIAN IN AN UNCHRISTIAN WORLD**

Matthew 5:13-16

Your mission – *our* mission, as we saw last Sunday, is to be witnesses to the life-altering power and love of Jesus right where we are, sharing with family and friends, neighbors and co-workers, classmates and teammates, what God has done for us, and how merciful and gracious He has been to us. Unless or until God calls you somewhere else, that is your mission right where you are, and where you are is your mission field.

By means of two simple word-pictures in the Sermon on the Mount, focusing on two ordinary, common, everyday commodities – salt and light, Jesus explains how we are to function as His followers in the world, and the kind of influence you and I are to have in our mission field, in the place(s) where God has stationed us to carry out His mission for our lives.

So, let's talk about salt and light, because, Jesus says, that is what we are and what we are to be as His representatives in this world.

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

First, Jesus says: “You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). Salt functions at least three ways. In the first place, salt can be used as a preservative, to prevent food from spoiling, or, at least, to slow down the process of decay. This may not seem like a big deal to us, because we have refrigerators and freezers to keep food from spoiling. But the first household refrigerators were not in use until the 1920s. In the time of Jesus, and throughout most of history, salt was used to prevent food, especially meat, from going bad.

In a similar way, you and I are to help keep the world from becoming completely rotten. That is part of our mission individually as Jesus' followers, and part of the mission of the church in the world. Jesus knew the moral and spiritual condition of the world. He knows the condition of the world today. He knows that apart from Him and the new life He offers, this world is going to hell, both figuratively and literally. The world of the 21st century, like the world of the 1st century, stands in desperate need of something to stop (or at least slow down) its downward spiral toward moral and spiritual chaos and decay. I don't think I need to spell out for you in detail what it is like in the world today. Just read the newspaper or watch the news on TV.

Here is where you and I come in. Here is one essential and inescapable part of your mission and my mission and the mission of the church. The Lord Jesus has placed His people in the world and, for reasons we may not fully comprehend, He has put us right here in northern Virginia, in close proximity to the corridors of power at the White House, on Capitol Hill, at the Pentagon, and in other places throughout the Capital region, for precisely this reason: To

act as a preserving agent, to preserve what is good and true and right, what is pure and lovely and admirable (Philippians 4:8), and to model a style and quality of life that bring light and life and hope and peace, not evil and despair and death. Our mission as the salt of the earth is to proclaim and promote and preserve all that is good and honoring to God, and to stand both resolutely and lovingly against the spread of evil, doing all we can to stop it.

This has always been part of the church's mission in the world, and it still is today, for the church as a whole, and for each of us in all of our relationships and responsibilities.

Second, salt was – and is – used as a seasoning, to bring out the flavor in food. Tim Keller explains it, using corn on the cob as an example. Don't you love eating corn on the cob in the summer? Corn was a staple in our family garden when I was growing up. There were dinner times in the Smith household when we (a family of six, with four hungry males) would devour as many as 20 ears of corn. Keller says that corn on the cob without salt on it just doesn't do it for him. He's got to put some salt on it. When he has eaten a delicious ear of corn, he doesn't say: "That salt sure was great." No. He says: "That was great corn on the cob." The job of the salt, he says, is to make the corn on the cob taste good. It is not to make you think how great the salt is, but how great the thing is with which the salt is involved. (From *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*).

The point, I hope, is obvious. Your mission and mine is not to get people to say how great or how loving, how compassionate or how generous or how smart we are. It's not about us. It's not about you. It's not about me (even though there are lots of times when I want it to be about me). It's about Jesus. It's about the amazing grace, the unfailing love, and the life-giving, life-changing power of God, the flavors of which our lives are to bring out.

Eugene Peterson phrases it like this in *The Message*. Jesus says: "Let me tell you why you're here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth."

If that is so (and it is), then our lives as followers of Jesus and members of His church should be anything but bland and tasteless. Contrary to what many people think, living for Jesus is not a dull and boring existence. If your life is boring, don't blame it on Jesus. It is not His fault. Life with Jesus is really the adventure of a lifetime. And our job as the salt of the earth is to bear faithful witness to the hope and joy and fulfillment and zest for life that Jesus, and only Jesus, can give.

There is something else that salt does. In addition to acting as a preservative and bringing out the flavors in food salt also makes people thirsty. It's true, isn't it? When you eat something salty, don't you want something to wash it down with? Salt makes a person thirsty. And our mission is to make people thirsty for the water of life, for the abundant life, that only Jesus can give.

That is our mission as witnesses to the Lord Jesus. Through the witness of our words and deeds, Jesus wants us to make other people thirsty to know Him, and to experience His power and love and grace. Jesus wants us to bring thirsty people, broken people, wounded people, lonely people, people who want to change but don't know how, people who have everything

they ever wanted but still feel empty inside, people just like you and me, to Him, because only He can give us what we need most of all.

Your mission is to be the salt of the earth. That's why you're here: To do what salt does. But notice what Jesus says. If salt loses its saltiness, what good is it? If salt gets contaminated with impurities, if it loses its zip, what is it good for? Nothing. What good is the church if it compromises with the culture out of a desire to be accepted, if it loses its distinctiveness and simply mirrors the world? If we are just like everybody else in our attitudes and values, in the way we think and live, what good are we to God?

And what good is salt if it never gets out of the saltshaker? What good are we if we hide in the saltshaker of the church and never venture out of the saltshaker into life? In order to fulfill your mission, you've got to get out of the saltshaker and into the world where God can use you.

That is enough about salt.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

The second word-picture Jesus uses is light. In verse 14, He says to His followers: "You are the light of the world."

I want to tell you a story to illustrate what this means. I've told this story before, so some of you may remember it. But it has been a long, long time since I told it. It comes from Robert Fulghum, author of the best-selling classic *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. It is in kindergarten, he says, that you learn things like:

- Play fair. Don't hit people
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.

Important life lessons, every one. If you didn't learn these things beforehand, you should definitely learn them in kindergarten.

Robert Fulghum wrote another book, this one titled *It was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, in which he tells about attending a two-week seminar on the island of Crete led by a man named Alexander Papaderos. At the conclusion of the final session, Dr. Papaderos asked, as speakers sometimes do: "Are there any question?" After a few seconds of silence, Robert Fulghum spoke up and said: "Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?"

There was laughter from the audience, and people gathered their things as they prepared to leave. But Dr. Papaderos held up his hand and quieted the room. After a long pause, he said:

“I will answer your question.” He took his wallet out of his pocket, and from his wallet he pulled out a very small, round mirror, about the size of a quarter. Then he said:

“When I was a (boy), during the war” – this was World War II – “we were very poor, and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found several broken pieces of a mirror. A German Soldier’s motorcycle had been wrecked there. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but that was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. *This* one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round.

“I began to play with it as a toy, and I became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine – in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game.

“As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light ... is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the black places in the hearts of men – and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. That is what I am about. That is the meaning of my life.”

Then Dr. Papaderos took that small mirror and, holding it carefully, he caught the bright rays of sunlight streaming through the window, and reflected them on Robert Fulghum’s face.

I trust the point is obvious. There *are* a lot of dark places in the world, “deep holes and crevices and dark closets” where the light of God’s truth and love doesn’t shine. There is moral and spiritual darkness in the hearts of people, in homes and families and neighborhoods and schools and workplaces and nations everywhere.

But Jesus came to bring light to the darkness of the world and the darkness of our hearts. He who is Himself the light of the world (John 8:12) says to us, His followers: “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

It is not enough to curse the darkness in the world. That’s easy. Anybody can do it. Our job, as Paul says in Philippians 2:15, is to shine like stars, lighting up the night sky in the midst of a world that has lost its way. Your mission in life is to let the light of Jesus shine in you and through you to illumine the dark places of this world.

Dr. Papaderos was right. You and I are not the source of the light. We just reflect it. Jesus is the source. He is “the true light that gives light to everyone” (John 1:9). We only deceive ourselves if we think we can shine on our own.

Listen again to *The Message*. Jesus says: “You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a

bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand – shine!"

Let your light shine where you are. Let your light shine on the mission field where God has placed you. Don't hide the light of Jesus and His amazing grace in your life. Don't ever be embarrassed by it or apologize for it. Let it shine. Let it shine in the deep holes and crevices and dark closets of life, where the saving, healing, transforming power of Jesus is so desperately needed.

Let your light shine not to impress other people, but so that by the light of your witness, in both words and good deeds, others will see God in you and will give Him the praise He deserves. As it says in Psalm 115:1:

Not to us, O LORD, not to us
but to Your name be the glory,
because of Your love and faithfulness.

Not to us. Not to me. But to Him.

YOUR MISSION

Your mission as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ and members of His church is to be salt and light in the world. So, be what you are, and do what salt is supposed to do, on the mission field where God has placed you. Be what you are, and reflect the light of Jesus into the dark places all around you.

Lord, let it be so in each of us. And let it be so in all of us together, in Your church, as Your church, right here in this mission field, and to the ends of the earth. To the glory of Your name. Amen.