Sermon Series:  A Kingdom Culture
Sermon Title:  Where Do We Go From Here?
The Christian’s Responsibility in a Pagan Culture
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Scripture Text:  Matthew 5: 13-16

More than a quarter of a century ago, the English author, Malcolm Muggeridge, once asked: “How do you boil a frog?” The answer is that you don’t boil a frog by dropping it into a pan of hot water, for it then simply jumps out. The way to boil a frog is to place it in a pan of cool water and gradually raise the temperature on an incremental basis. That way, the frog will die without even having been aware of what was happening. “In the same way, the Church often seems to be blithely unaware of the peril that now surrounds it.”

I’m sure you’ve heard this analogy before, but my point is that now, in the 21st century; the decline of our culture is no longer on slow boil. The heat has been turned up. And unless you have lived in a cave for the last ten years, you have encountered the most rapid decline of culture in your lifetime.

… We must not underestimate what we are up against. We face titanic struggles on behalf of human life and human dignity against the culture of death and the great evils of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. We are in a great fight for the integrity of marriage as the union of a man and a woman. We face a cultural alliance determined to advance a sexual revolution that will unleash unmitigated chaos and bring great injury to individuals, families, and the society at large. We are fighting to defend gender as part of the goodness of God’s creation and to defend the very existence of an objective moral order.

Al Mohler

I don’t know about you, but it just feels really, really odd to me. Things ARE different. In fact, cultural historian, David Wells sees the present time as being “Vastly different from any other time in history” (There is no place for the Truth). That statement should give us all pause, because it suggests the very fact that you are living right now is no accident. I can’t help but think of what was said to the Old Testament character, Esther, who was in the right place, at the right time, to help fulfill God’s plan in a period of great evil.

If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?

Esther 4.14

What is interesting to me is that in the book of Esther, God’s name is nowhere mentioned, yet the finger of God is everywhere. And I know that her context was completely different, but listen, Esther was given the opportunity to make a difference where she was. We also, are given the opportunity to make a difference where we are. You may be alive for just such a time as this.
What is a Christian to do with these sweeping changes going on in our culture? How should we respond? Historically, Christians have responded in 4 basic ways:

There are those who say we should flee from the culture (retreat).

The idea is that there’s nothing we can do about it, so just close your eyes and maybe it will all go away. There’s the story about the monk living in the dark ages, when he woke up one night hungry; all he had was an apple near his bed. So he lit his candle, found the apple and noticed by the light of the candle that it had worms. So he promptly blew out the candle and enjoyed his late night snack.

Rob Schwarzwalder said, “The culture is an ocean, and Christians are afloat —sometimes barely — in it. Saying we will avoid the culture completely is sort of like a fish saying it dislikes water.”

Then, there are those who say we need to fight against the culture (resistance).

We see this response in the attempts to change culture by political or legal processes. How’s that working out? One of the signs of decay there is that our nation’s leaders can’t get together on anything. Our nation is divided. Abraham Lincoln wasn’t the first to say, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” But, the culture isn’t our enemy. Not everything in culture is bad.

A third option is promoted by those who say we should fit in with the culture (assimilation).

This may be the most alarming response because the church is now proactively adopting the culture’s values, thinking it will help to bring in the crowds and make us relevant. This is sort of the “if you can’t beat ‘em join ‘em” mentality. But the Bible cautions,

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 4.4 ESV

Finally, there’s the response which I would say is most biblical, and that is, we focus on changing or really, creating the culture (transformation).

And I wish we had time to look into this from the book of Genesis.

Then God said, ”Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.

Genesis 1:26-29ESV

The gist of this passage is that while creation is something that God makes, culture is something man makes. And we, as Christians, would do well to follow God's plans for building it. This is the Cultural Mandate. Theologian Walter Bruggemann, in his essay, “Blessed Are the History Makers,” reminds us that “culture is created, history is made, by those who are radically committed to obeying God at all costs.”

Well, we don't have to guess on what we need to do. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 to do what true believers have always done — simply be a real Christian that holds the values of the kingdom. As John Stott wisely observed, "The question is not, what is wrong with the culture (which is what we usually focus on) but where is the salt?" Where is the light?

The greatest influence a Christian can have on the culture is to live out, with integrity, the values of the kingdom.

And this is what Jesus teaches here. Let's look at it.

“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.”

Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus is talking here about one thing: the influence on the world by Christians. So how do we do that? How do we influence our culture for Christ? We have to be salt and light.

I want to give you four basic thoughts that come out of this passage:
First, the Necessity of the Christian’s Influence, second, the Nature of the Christian’s Influence, third, the Neglect of the Christian’s Influence and last, the Nurture of the Christian’s Influence.

1. the absolute Necessity of the Christian’s Influence

Now listen, Jesus doesn't simply say you ARE salt or you ARE light, no, He says you are THE salt, THE light for the world. You say is that important? It is if there's no other salt or the light in the world. Jesus is telling us that for all the good that IS in the culture, there is no substitute for the real thing. There is no substitute for the Christian influence in the world.
Not only are you God’s means to influence the culture, you are God’s ONLY means to influence the culture. In other words, this is your identity in the world. It’s what you are. He doesn’t say, “you will be salt...” or “you might be salt...” or “you can be salt...” He says you are. Actually, the pronouns have the emphasis in these verses, and should be read like this: YOU are the salt ... YOU are the light. If you’re a Christian YOU are God’s means to influence the decay and the darkness right now.

And by the way, the “you” is plural. Have you ever had someone ask you to “pass the salt” and you picked out one little grain and handed it to them? No, in order to make a difference, there’s got to be enough of it. And so, what Jesus says includes all of us.

The story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany provides a case in point. While many of the ministers in Germany either put their heads in the sand while rampant abuses occurred, or even worse, joined hands with the Nazis. Bonhoeffer stood tall against bigotry, racism, cruelty, and despotism. He continued preaching until he was kicked out of his pulpit, then he kept teaching young ministers in preparation for a restored Germany. He had a chance to escape to America or England. But instead, Bonhoeffer believed that his country needed Christian influence if they were to survive the tyranny of Hitler. So he stayed. In 1937, two years before Hitler’s invasion of Poland, he wrote these words, "Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call [of the Christian]. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow" [The Cost of Discipleship, 118]. He stayed where he was to be salt and light in the midst of the darkness that was Nazi Germany. Himmler ordered Bonhoeffer hung a week before the Allied liberation, but the salty effects of his testimony helped to turn a broken nation around.

2. Jesus points out the true Nature of the Christian’s influence.

The truth is contained in the metaphor. So, let’s talk about salt for a minute. What is Jesus saying to us with this metaphor?

As I thought about the uses for salt and what this might mean, I thought, who better to know about salt than the Morton salt company? Right? And so I check online and they say that there are over 14,000 uses for salt. Wow! I think they are trying to sell us something. This morning we’re going to start going through each of these ... Well, really let me save us some time. In the ancient world too, there were many uses for salt, but I want to look at just two this morning.

Salt Enhances Flavor
Just like today, salt was used to enhance flavor. And we know that’s true. But unfortunately, when the world thinks of a Christian, they might say we take the taste out of life. That’s often because we want to dump the whole load on them.

Salt Preserves
Jesus may have something else in mind here. Not only was it used to enhance flavor, but also in the ancient world salt was commonly used to preserve, especially to keep meat from going bad. When rubbed into meat, a little salt would slow the decay. So what Jesus is saying then is that the Christian influence preserves the culture. The world is like meat going bad, and the influence of the Christian will keep it from getting worse.
Mahatma Ghandi is still considered one of the most respected leaders of modern history, for not only his life, but also his ideals and his message to the people. Although Hindu, Ghandi had a very close connection with Christianity and admired Jesus very much, often quoting from his favorite 'Sermon on the Mount' chapter in Mathew 5–7.

When the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Ghandi he asked him, "Mr. Ghandi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower?"

Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ."

"If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today," he added. Ghandi’s closeness with Christianity began when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. Apart from being attached with the Christian faith, he intently studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was also seriously exploring becoming a Christian, which led him to his discovery of a small church gathering in his locality.

After deciding to attend the church service in South Africa, he came across a racial barrier, the church barred his way at the door. "Where do you think you're going, kaffir?" an English man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone.

Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here."

The church elder snarled at him, "There's no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps."

This infamous incident forced Ghandi to never again consider being a Christian, but rather adopt what he found in Christianity and its founder Jesus Christ.

3. The dangerous Neglect of Christian’s Influence.

Notice verse 13: "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."

"lost its taste" (moraino = to make something tasteless and bland). If you know anything about chemistry, you know that salt is one of the most stable elements in all of creation. So the question is, how could salt lose its taste?

William Thompson, in his classic book The Land and the Book, which deals with the nation of Israel, tells about a merchant who rented several homes in which he stored salt. The merchant, however, forgot to cover the dirt floor before he put the salt down, and simply unloaded the salt on the dirt. When he returned later, he discovered that his salt had lost its flavor from being next to the earth. The whole supply he threw into the street, where men walked on it.

Just to clarify the point Jesus makes here: the influence of the salt can be lost due to impurities that invade the salt (that's what happens when disciples look so much like the culture that there's no visible difference between the two). This is the danger of lost
influence. Have you lost yours? That usually happens when we relax and compromise the Bible’s standards and stop thinking like Jesus.

**We talked about the salt. Now, what does Jesus say about the light?** The fact is that light, whether there’s a lot of it (like a city on a hill) or just a little (like a candle from a flame) interrupts the darkness whenever and wherever it shines. When the light is on, it will influence the world. How so? Verses 14-15 tell us: “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.”

**You say, what is the light?** Light is simply the knowledge of God. We are just a reflection of his light. As the scripture says, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4.6).

Light is the knowledge of God. Specifically, light is the knowledge of the GLORY of God. And God’s glory is his goodness revealed. So if we’re letting our light shine, we are giving the world knowledge of the goodness of God. And what happens? Our culture just gets that much darker because they don’t know God and his goodness and that much more corrupt because there is no preserving influence.

**Again, the greatest influence a Christian can have on the culture is to live out, with integrity, the values of the kingdom.**

Well, let me quickly give you the fourth thought here from Jesus. And that is:

**4. The Nurture of the Christian’s Influence**

*T.S. Eliot has said about culture – “you don’t build a tree – and culture is like a tree – it has to be grown. And it’s the result of the by-product of watering, and nurturing, and all that goes on with it.”* Verse 16: “...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” And here it really becomes practical. Let your light shine. So that what? …*they may see your good works.* There are generally three words that are translated ‘good’ in the Greek: *agathos*, which means good in the sense of moral excellence, *chrestos*, which refers to something good because its useful, and the third is *kalos*, which essentially means ‘free from defects, beautiful.’ That’s the word as it’s used here. Let the world see the works that you do that are beautiful, attractive, free from defects. When they see that they’ll give glory to God.

In his book, *God in the Wasteland*, David Wells delivers to all of us a stirring challenge as he writes:

> I want the Evangelical church to be the church. I want it to embody a vibrant spirituality. I want the church to be an alternative to post-modern culture, not a mere echo of it. I want a church that is bold to be different and unafraid to be faithful...a church that reflects an integral and undiminished confidence in the power of God’s word, a church that can find in the midst of our present cultural breakdown the opportunity to be God’s people in a world that has abandoned
**God.** To be the church in this way, it is also going to have to find in the coming generation, leaders who exemplify this hope for its future and who will devote themselves to seeing it realized. To lead the church in the way that it needs to be led, they will have to rise above the internal politics of the evangelical world and refuse to accept the status quo where that no longer serves the vital interest of the Kingdom of God. They will have to decline to spend themselves in the building of their own private kingdoms and refuse to be intimidated into giving the church less and other than what it needs. Instead, they will have to begin to build afresh, in cogently biblical ways, among the decaying structures that now clutter the evangelical landscape. To succeed, they will have to be people of large vision, people of courage, people who have learned again what it means to live by the word of God, and, most importantly, what it means to live before the Holy God of that word.

The story is told of the Reformation leader, Martin Luther — who is described as one day climbing the steep, dark steps of a European cathedral tower; feeling unsure because of the darkness, and groping for something to hold onto, he accidentally found and pulled down on a rope that was hanging from the tower. And to his surprise, he heard a bell ring out above him...waking up the whole countryside.

- The darkness is very often just before the dawn — that’s not a cliché, this is what the Holy Spirit does in revival.
- The church must go backwards in order to go forward — back to the gospel. If we are faithful, the Spirit can and will do great things in the midst of a dark and decaying culture.

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**Some questions follow for your use in House Church discussions.**

1. Do you believe God has placed YOU in the earth “for such a time as this”? If so how does that influence the way you live out your life?

2. Kelly discussed four responses Christians have to the culture. Christians:
   a. Retreat
   b. Resist
   c. Assimilate
   d. Transform

   What is your response currently? Any plans for change in light of this message?

3. In terms of creating a kingdom culture, what does it mean to be THE “salt”?
   a. What are we to preserve?
   b. How do we bring flavor?

4. What does it mean to be THE light?