

August 18, 2024

“Community: The Means of Outreach”

Matthew 5:13-16

FCF: Isolation leaves us not only lonely but weak and ineffective

PROPOSITION: (anchor) God has given us a shared calling.
(magnet) And the very nature of this calling demands community.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Peace and quiet may sound like the ideal cure for your ills. But, taken too far, it can cause some problems. I was reminded of that after hearing an interview on NPR with Atul Gawande, following up on an article published in the *New Yorker* entitled “Hell Hole” (READ):

LYDEN: As I understand it, you're saying that solitary confinement is a hell hole, that it's torture. Why do you say that?

Dr. GAWANDE: The reason is simply the accumulation of experience and studies showing what happens when you put people in isolation from other human beings.

It turns out we are fundamentally social creatures, not just in the sense that we get lonely when we're alone, but in the sense that without social interaction, especially when it becomes months or years on end, we lose our capability of being normal.

The point being that we aren't meant to be isolated. It cuts into our most basic needs.

We need community. To grow, to flourish, we need others in our lives. Taking this a step further, you can't follow Christ on your own. Again, we're re-starting our community groups next month. And with that in mind, it would seem appropriate to consider these things together.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 5:1-16](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

There are some things in which you simply cannot go it alone. College football season is nearly upon us and analysts are weighing in on who has the best shot at winning the Heisman. Well, here's the thing. No matter who it is, he simply cannot do it by himself. It's going to take his offensive line, his receivers, and a running game as well. To say nothing of coaching, defense and special teams. Why? There are some things in which you simply cannot go it alone.

The gospel creates community. And our calling as Christians demands community. This text begins in vv.3-12 with the Beatitudes, with our character. This flows into vv.13-16, our influence. That is, the influence of the Christian community as a whole. The “you” in vv.13 and 14 are both emphatic. But they are also both plural. The idea being that it's only together, as a body, as a community, that these callings can be carried out in the way Jesus intends. Which, of course, strikes against our proud Lone Ranger mentality, thinking we can somehow go it alone.

Again, we're thinking about our community groups - not so much the “what” we do but the “why” we're doing it. Community is a means of outreach. Put another way, God has given us a shared calling. And the very nature of this calling demands community. And we clearly see that in these three images Jesus uses in our text – to be salt, to be light, and to be a city on a hill.

I. THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Each demands community. First, the salt of the earth (READ [Matthew 5:13](#)).

A) *Unpacking the Details*

1. The place of salt in the ancient world

Let's unpack this. What was the place of salt in the ancient Near East? Keep in mind this is before modern refrigeration. Salt wasn't vital so much for seasoning food as for preserving it.

2. The condition for its usefulness

But there is a condition here for its usefulness. It must not lose its saltiness. What is that about? Understand that "salt" were pieces of rock dug from the ground with all the impurities. Over time, the salt was dissolved, and that left a residue that looked much like salt but had no use.

B) Understanding the Metaphor

1. The world's need of the Christian community

So what is Jesus getting at? The world is a place of decay. It tends to rot like meat, while the church can hinder this decay. That is, the world, whether it knows it or not, needs the church.

2. The Christian community's need to remain distinct

But the church, the Christian community, needs to remain distinct. To remain effective, we must retain our saltiness. Our influence depends not on our being identical but on our being distinct.

Jesus is making clear that we are the salt of the earth. That is our calling.

Application:

This calling demands a communal response. The call is to hinder the decay, to penetrate the world, to be a living demonstration of the gospel. Two thoughts. First, not much preserving comes by one grain of salt. It takes a shaker. Second, there's no point at all in blaming unsalted meat for going bad. We need to be asking ourselves, "Where is the salt? Where is it needed?" And then be it. In love, we are to stand against the rot and for what is true – in word and deed.

We are to be the salt of the earth. And to heed the condition here – remaining salty, understanding our culture without assimilating into it, identifying with the struggles of those around us without imitating their lifestyles. The very nature of that calling demands community.

II. THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

For we are the salt of the earth. But there's something else (**READ Matthew 5:14-15**).

A) Unpacking the Details

1. The place of light in the ancient world

Again, let's unpack this. This is an age without electricity. When the sun went down, that was it – except for whatever small lamps you might have had, likely earthen vessels of some kind.

2. The condition for its usefulness

Now such a lamp was typically placed on a stand to give maximum illumination. You certainly wouldn't put it under a basket. This would block the light and possibly extinguish the flame.

B) Understanding the Metaphor

1. The world's need for the Christian community

Again, what is Jesus getting at? The world is a place of darkness. Jesus says elsewhere that He is the Light of the world. And He is making clear that, by extension, so too are His followers.

2. The Christian community's need to shine

This dark world needs light. But again there is a condition. To remain effective, our light must not be hidden. That is, our influence depends not on our being isolated but on being engaged.

Jesus is making clear that we are the light of the world. That is our calling.

Application:

And this too demands a communal response. Two thoughts here. First, not much real illumination comes by one little candle. It takes a flooding of lights brought together. Second, as light in this world we have the message of hope. In Christ, we have forgiveness of sin – the sentence commuted. In Christ, we have freedom from sin – the chains of its tyranny broken. In Christ, there is the promise of a deeper, richer life, a transformation. That's a message of hope.

We are the light of the world. But again, there is a condition. We must not be hidden. We must not keep it to ourselves. Even when the salt bites and the light exposes and we get no thanks for the shining. When the pushback comes, we'll want to hide. So to the degree we take this seriously, we discover we can't do it alone. The nature of that calling demands community.

III. A CITY ON A HILL

Finally, Jesus says we are to be a city on a hill (**READ Matthew 5:14b-16**).

A) Unpacking the Details

1. The image of a city

In the ancient Near East, what was a city? It was a place of help and protection. It was a place where justice could be sought. And it was a place for the creation and cultivation of culture. The point being a city is always a gathering of people. A city logically always means a plurality.

2. An elevated city

Jesus speaks here of such a place, a city, on a hill. It's an elevated city, not hidden away but lifted up to be seen. It is not in a valley but on the heights. It is not behind a hill but upon it.

B) Understanding the Metaphor

1. Old Testament Israel

What is Jesus getting at here? If you go back and read through the Old Testament, you see this theme of the people of Israel called out to be a light to the nations, a community through which the rest of the world would be blessed. This was true from the very start. We saw this earlier in Deuteronomy 4. Among other things, there was a missiological motivation for obedience.

2. New Testament church

And this missiological motivation flows from the Old Testament era into the New. The church exists for the purpose – at least partially – of making the character and the ways of God known to world. How? Not just by the content of our words but by the quality of our life together, by the reality of our love for one another. We are meant to be a compelling example, to be living signposts of the kingdom. And Jesus said that will attract all the world to His Father.

He says we are a city on a hill, the image being of a brightly lit community on a hill-top, representing the corporate effect of all the combined “lights” of His individual followers.

Illustration:

It was February 1962. John Glenn’s *Friendship 7* was making the first American orbital flight. As he completed his first orbit, he passed over the Indian Ocean and the dark Australian outback. All was so very dark on every side. But as he looked to the earth, he saw a glow on the Australian continent. What was this? The city of Perth in Western Australia decided to stay up that night and turn on their lights – every streetlight, every porch light – to greet this traveler above them. Glenn said to ground control (**READ**), “The lights show up very well. Thank everybody for turning them on.” Ever since then, Perth has been known as the “City of Light”.

Now, here’s the question. Could any of those porches or light poles have been visible on their own? No, of course not. It was only as they shone together that they could be seen.

We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill. That is our calling.

Application:

And this demands a communal response. It cannot be done alone. The vast majority of the commands in the Bible are not to individuals but to a people, a community. Together, we are to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. And the world will see. Together, we are to be a counter-culture in how we use money, sex, and power in life-giving ways - not as idols to be worshipped but received and stewarded as God intends. And the world will see. Together, we are to learn to disagree agreeably, in a supernatural way. And the world will see.

We are to be salt, to be light, to be a city on a hill. Each of these is done together.

CONCLUSION:

God has given us a shared calling. The nature of this calling demands community. The English missionary William Carey is often called the father of modern missions. As he prayed over the needs of the world, God laid India on his heart. He went in 1793. At a commissioning service for Carey and his colleague, one of Carey’s friends is said to have exclaimed (**READ**), “There is a gold mine in India but it seems almost as deep as the centre of the earth!” to which Carey then replied, “I will venture down but remember that you must hold the ropes.”

What did it mean to “hold the ropes”? Financial and material support. But relational support as well – encouragement and kindness. And prayer support – both for him and those he was serving. That’s holding the ropes. We need the same thing today. And to give it.

The gospel creates community. And our calling as Christians demands community. This is partly what’s behind our Community Group ministry – to enable us to live out these images - salt, light, a city on a hill. There is a world to be reached. And there are ropes to be held. God has given us a shared calling. And the very nature of this calling demands community.

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