

Matthew 5:13

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Preacher: Donald Macleod

[0 : 00] I want now to turn to the Gospel of Matthew on the fifth chapter and verse 13. Matthew chapter 5 and verse 13.

You are the salt of the earth. Now, two weeks ago we saw something of the Lord as a teacher. We saw that the Lord taught with compassion and humility. The Lord taught with authority. And the Lord taught in an orderly and logical way.

I want this morning to hear something of the Lord's teaching. He has, in the first part of the sermon, defined for us what a Christian is.

In terms of those Beatitudes that set forth so clearly the attributes of a child of God.

[1 : 18] And now he is stressing the kind of influence that this sort of person has. Because he or she is this kind of person.

Therefore, he or she has this kind of influence. And I want to explore this morning for a moment what influence Christians and the church ought to exercise in the world in which we live.

I want to ask at one level exactly what is the influence. But I want to ask, too, what are the conditions about having this influence.

And I even want to ask where are we supposed to have this kind of influence. Let's ask, first of all, what is this influence?

Well, Jesus says, we are the salt of the earth and we are the light of the world. Let's take those in turn.

[2 : 41] We are the salt of the earth. Not simply the salt of the church or the salt of Jerusalem. But we are the salt of the earth.

And the way the Lord puts it, the emphasis falls here on the personal problem. You are the salt of the earth.

He looks at this small gathering of humble, almost primitive men and women.

And he says to them, you are the salt of the earth. And in many ways, you remind yourself that this was an age of a very great talent.

There were so many religious men among the Jews themselves. There were great rabbis. There were great politicians at Rome with this age of Augustus.

[3 : 46] There were great poets and great philosophers like Seneca and great historians and dramatists.

There were great soldiers. And then he says to them, you are the salt of the earth. And you know, it's intriguing too that the Lord doesn't say that you must be or you ought to be, but he says you are. And sometimes we approach this whole passage, I think, in the wrong frame of mind, looking for our duty. Whereas what we find here is this categorical statement, this indicative statement.

This is what you actually are. The Lord is setting us some mountain to climb. He isn't proposing to us some great arduous course of duty.

But the Lord is saying, this is the way it is. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You. And it's something that you actually are.

[5 : 07] It isn't a summons or an imperative or an obligation. It is a great statement of fact. And it has two great poles.

First, you are the salt of the earth. You are what keeps this world from going rotten. And certainly behind the Lord's words, there is a great pessimistic analysis of the state of the world and the condition of human nature.

There is recognition that it is the tendency of the world to go bad. Just as meat left to itself putrefies and rots.

So, it is the tendency of the world to go bad. It's a tendency of society to collapse. In other words, there is a law of entropy in the moral and spiritual world as there is in the physical world. In that physical world, entropy means that all energy systems tend towards decay and tends towards dissolving.

[6 : 32] The whole tendency of the physical world is towards collapse, towards the loss of system, towards the loss of energy.

And the Lord is saying that that law isn't confined at all to the physical sphere. It's true, of course, at one level that our own spiritual lives are marked by the same law of entropy.

Without the constant input of new spiritual energy, our own spiritual lives collapse into disorder and into impotence.

And it's true equally of the church of God that without the constant input of the reviving energy of God's spirit, the church and every single church tends towards the same conclusion of disorder and of impotence.

But hear the Lord say that it is the tendency of the world or the earth itself to collapse into rotteness, putrefaction, into disorder, into spiritual anarchy, into spiritual indiscipline, and spiritual impotence.

[7 : 55] And of course, this was perfectly evident in the world of the Lord's own day. You see that in the great picture drawn by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1, where a world abandoned by God found itself rushing headlong into the most appalling moral and spiritual anarchy and decay.

We've seen it too, I dare say, in the Western world since the middle of the 19th century. The collapse of what was called the common view, where all the aspects of our civilization were at least paying lip service to the intellectual scheme of Christianity.

But then there came Darwin and there came Freud and that world you fell apart. And we have been moving ever since that day into this state of rotteness, this disorder which is so prevalent around us at the moment.

But I'm not here this morning to expatiate us a prophet of doom. That theme has been sounded often enough. We all know just how bad things are.

And they are bad. Because the church of Christ itself lost faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And because the Western world lost its anchorage in, its orientation around the Christian system of thought and belief.

[9 : 41] And what's happened? We have the disorder. We have the lack of absolutes, the lack of guiding principles, which prevails in the world at the moment, where everybody thinks that ethics is simply a matter of making your own decision and making your own choice as to sexual preference and so on.

Because the world has lost its salt. And Jesus is saying to us that that is our function. And of course it's a sobering thing because it's a sobering thing because we are meant to make the world better. But we are here to prevent the world getting worse. You know, you must never imagine that things could get worse.

There is no possible point in human history from which civilization may not descend into lower depths of godlessness and barbarism.

And we may imagine today, well, things couldn't get worse. But they could get so very much worse because there are still in our society values and codes and practices which at least set barriers against the expression of human depravity in some completely uninhibited way.

[11 : 24] And the Lord is saying to us at this very moment that even when we are in the world today, in Aberdeen today, we must still function as the salt which prevents the collapse into further anarchy and into further darkness.

It's a very limited vision in a way. We are here to prevent things getting worse. And that means that as you go back tomorrow to your own spheres of influence, to your own workplaces, into commerce and the professions and the colleges and marketplaces and workplaces, that it is our influence to prevent things getting worse, to decelerate, limit, restrict the process of moral and spiritual collapse. And that the Lord says this to us, that we are the light of the world, not simply the salt which prevents putrefaction, but we are the light.

And here again, of course, you have the pessimistic diagnosis that the world is darkness. And that again is such an astonishing thing, not least in this world of the first century.

Because in many ways, the world then thought it had great light. It thought it was really enlightened. There were great artists and great poets and great philosophers.

[13:16] And they thought, as they tend to think still today, that they were the light of the world. That only in artist studios, only in South Cyrus or poets, only in great musical gatherings and philosophical discussions, there was the light of the world.

And the Lord said, no, that world is in darkness. In the 19th century, you had all the great poets of the Romantic movement.

You had great philosophers in Britain and Germany. You had great musicians, great artists. And they thought they were the enlightenment.

How do men see the church today? We are, of course, seen as a great gathering of obscurantists. We are congregations from which nothing emanates but darkness.

That's where the world sees us. And how this morning can I let you hear the voice of Jesus Christ without you being tempted towards pride and towards arrogance as the Lord says to you that you are not the great existentialists.

[14:51] You are not the great novelists. You are not the great movie makers. You are not the great poets and the great dramatists.

that you are the light of the world. And I can hear the world's uproarious laughter.

Can you imagine the world's reaction as the Lord Jesus says to us down through those two millennia? You are the light of the world.

That all the light that is in Scotland is the light which emanates from the church of Jesus Christ. And that the world that the Lord is not saying to us that is your duty.

But the Lord is saying that's what you are. Of course, there is a duty as well. Let your light shine.

But being light is not a duty. Being light is a great statement of fact.

[15:57] That's what we are. And the Lord is saying to us, you are the people who must bring information to an ignorant world.

You must bring the truth, the truth, the facts about God and the gospel. You must bring that truth to the world because that gospel is the light of the world.

You must bring hope, you bring hope into a world of darkness and despair, a despair that is encouraged and exacerbated by those who think they are the light.

And who are very often the prophets of despair who in their enlightenment have nothing have nothing to bring to men and women in the face of death but the pessimism of their own naked materialism.

And instead, here we are. We have information for the world. We have news for the world. We have good news for the world. And we have hope for the world in the face of death, in the face of history, in the face of calamity.

[17:16] Give to those to ask of you a reason for the hope that is in you. We have news and we have hope and we have joy because what is this music that one hears from the tabernacles of the righteous?

The noise, the voice of joy and health, music and melody in the church of Jesus Christ. That, says the Lord, is the way it is and not saying it's your duty to be melodious and to be symphonic and to make great, great music.

But that, says the Lord, is the way it is. There is the voice of joy and health and it's this great melody. So we have light because we have news.

We have light because we have hope. We have light because we are centers of joy in the gloom and despair of this world. and we have war for the world.

This world which is often so cruel, which at the moment is being dominated by heartless market economics or by the ambition of uninhibited despotism and tyranny or by the coldness of Marxist inhumanity and the suppression of individual freedom and self-expression over and against that we have war.

[18:54] Whether there are Christians in schools or in police stations or in social work departments or in the fish mart or in commerce or in industrial building sites, is there warmth there?

There is the danger, is there not so often? The danger that we Christians are there to rebuke, to correct.

We are there as the great advocates of principle and law and order. And I'm not saying that sometimes the salt has to be judgmental and condemnatory and damnatory.

But I'm confident that what Jesus Christ brought to Galilee and Jerusalem and Judea was war and compassion and understanding.

And that is one of the great functions of the light of the world to bring war and humanity and care and concern wherever our Lord is cast in the providence of God.

[20 : 16] I have spoken here already on this theme and reminded you of the great tribute paid once to Thomas Chalmers. After he left Glasgow someone asked what did Chalmers do for Glasgow?

And there was the memorable answer given. He warmed it. And I'm asking this morning what do we do in our own spheres?

I'm asking what does Bonacore Church do for Abeldeen? Does it bring warmth?

It brings news. It brings hope. It brings joy. It brings the warmth of Christian humanity and Christian compassion.

and so there is the Lord's definition of what our influence actually is. We are the salt which inhibits putrefaction.

[21 : 27] We are the light which brings the news the hope the joy the warmth to the world in which we live. And I ask secondly what are the conditions of our exercising such an influence.

And shall I say at once that the condition is that we get involved. And you can look at any exposition of this particular passage and you will find that that emphasis is always made that the salt must be shaken out of the salt cellar and the salt must be rubbed into the meat.

And then men proceed to say you Christians you must be involved. And I'm sure I made that point myself many many times.

but I've come to a different perspective and it's this.

It is to us really where in the New Testament there is any great emphasis on believers getting involved.

[22 : 59] Where is that catina of passages which you can point to and say to me there is the Lord saying to his church get involved in society.

I doubt if there are such passages. And there are no such passages or few such passages for this reason. That those early Christians it never occurred to them not to be involved.

In fact not being involved wasn't an option. And for us you see the only way we can not be involved is by making an optional decision to disengage.

because we are cast by the providence of God in the world. And the only way you cannot be in the world is by disengaging from it and moving away from it.

The same Paul said to the church at Corinth I want you to distance yourselves from Christians who walk in a disorderly way.

[24 : 28] I'm not saying to you to distance yourselves from everybody who walks in a disorderly way. But only from Christians because otherwise you would need to disengage from the whole world.

And Paul says of course you must have relationships with the fornicators of this world. With it is only men and women of the world because otherwise you go out of the world.

And what I'm moving towards is this that there is a very great danger of a Protestant monasticism which is the consequence not of not making a commitment to the world but is the consequence of a deliberate disengagement from the world.

We are in the world. We have our neighbors, we have our colleagues, we have our workplaces or institutions or shop floors or market places you see.

We are there. We are not Mennonites, we are not Amish, we are not monks, we are not nuns, we are in the world.

[26 : 01] And there is no real need to make a deliberate decision to be involved. the only deliberateness is the conscious decision not to be involved.

And there are many Christians who make that decision, who in their work places are as ineffectual as mice as far as witness goes, people who are not socially engaged, not socially involved or geared into the spheres in which they earn their daily bread, who are not in any meaningful sense part of the sociology of their own professions or of their own communities.

And not only that, you see, but there is a constant and in some ways very plausible chorus within the whole evangelical movement today which is saying to us in a very disguised way that we should not be involved.

For example, if people argue for Christian schools, a large part of what they are saying the hidden agenda is that they will not be involved, they will not then be in the public or state school sector. No Christian teachers there, no Christian parents there, no Christian children there. And so the salt and the light have been taken out of the world.

[27 : 45] If people ask for Christian political parties, let's they say have a Christian democratic party. There is the same great hidden agenda that somehow we cannot be salt and light in the existing political parties.

It is the same if we say let's have church football teams or let's have church table tennis teams. It's the same retreat, you see.

it is minimizing the contact, minimizing the involvement, minimizing the impact upon the world itself. And so I am not going to start by saying that we are salt and light only if we make a commitment to being involved.

Because the assumption of the Bible is that you actually are involved. God has pitched for you into society. And you can only be uninvolved if you make a deliberate decision to retreat into Christian schools, into political parties, into Christian sport, recreation, culture, Christian leisure.

I am not sure but this whole epithet, the Christian this and the Christian that, is in fact a retreat from this principle that if we are to engage in non-religious pursuits, if we are going to educate, if we are going to play the oboe, if we are going to play football, if we are going to be politicians or journalists, that the answer is not to set up your own Christian this, that and the other.

[29 : 43] but the answer is within the existing parameters, within the existing arrangements, there, in secular education, in secular sport, in secular art, in secular politics, in the secular media, that there there is salt, and there there is light.

if you go to North America, there are thousands upon thousands of Christian schools, and there is a public school system, in which the youngsters carry guns, and fight their gangland battles with those guns in the playground.

world. If you look at the whole scenario, the Christian media in North America, what is the result? That in the massively influential secular media of the United States, there is scarcely a Christian vice.

And that's why I'm saying that involvement is not a duty. Involvement in the Lord's presentation here is a fact.

[31 : 09] And we can only be non-involved if we deliberately disengage. Well, what then are the great conditions of our exercise in this influence?

well, one of them is, I suppose, that we throw our own weight, our full weight, behind those forces in society which are themselves working for good.

There are, by God's grace and ordinance, there are certain institutions within society which are powerful influences for good.

There is the family, there is government, there are various professional bodies, there are cultural organizations, there are trades unions, there are bodies of that kind which I would call common grace institutions which are concerned concerned to ameliorate, concerned to maintain standards, concerned to ensure progress within the various spheres of human civilization.

And we as Christians are surely as the salt of the earth and the light of the world mandated to throw our influence behind those movements in society which are working to prevent its getting better and to impart to it some light and some warmth.

[33 : 02] It need not all be done through the ecclesiastical. It need not all be done through the institutions of special redeeming grace.

there are other organizations and movements behind which we Christians can legitimately throw our weight.

And we do it too by ensuring that we ourselves stay close to the Lord Jesus Christ because he is the light of the world and all the light that we have as derivative.

And it is so hugely important that we ourselves should continue to shine and should shine in the derived light of our risen Savior as we live in Christ and walk with Christ so we communicate in and share in the light that is the light of the glory of the Son of God.

And so we throw our weight behind all those movements which are making for good. We ensure that we ourselves stay close to Jesus the light of the world.

[34 : 27] And then this that we ourselves exercise in the world as Christians and as churches a meaningful ministry of compassion.

We are to exercise a meaningful ministry of compassion. Now I'm not sure as to what the proportions and balances are you see which comes first.

Evangelism or social responsibility. I want you for a moment to turn your Bible through chapter 8 of Matthew's gospel.

I want you to see the marvelous logic of Matthew's arrangement. This great teacher, preacher, evangelist, the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son.

It was said by a great preacher, God had only one son and he made him a preacher. And that really magnifies this terrifying office in which I stand before you this morning.

[35 : 40] But if you look at the NIV headings in Matthew 8 and Matthew 9, a very striking fact emerges. That is this, that this man was not simply a preacher.

And this man was not simply a teacher. You see the man of leprosy and the Lord healed him. The faith of a centurion, my servant is a paralytic and the Lord healed him.

You see there again Jesus heals many. And then you see the healing of the demon possessed men. And then Matthew 9, Jesus heals a paralytic.

and then again a dead girl and a sick woman. Jesus heals the blind and the mute. Now what is Matthew doing?

This great evangelist writing the story of the Son of God of the Lord Jesus Christ. What does he do? Well he's told us that he was a great teacher and he was a great minister of compassion.

[36 : 57] He taught and he relieved. He preached and he healed. Now I can't at this moment define in detail for you what that means.

But I'm convinced from the Old Testament. I'm convinced from the Gospels. I'm convinced from the Book of Acts that if the church is to make a meaningful and world transforming impact then the church must combine the teaching and the compassion the preaching and the healing that whatever form it must take yes I said once we have no miraculous healing powers and yet we have a responsibility to do what is within our own power to alleviate the needs of the poor it was true in the Lord's day that men could say all his family should look after him or the state should look after her and of course the Jews were absolutely outstanding at caring for their own poor and yet there were those who fell through the net and the Lord was dealing with them and if we are to ourselves make a meaningful impact upon the world of our day what must we do yes we must preach and teach we must make disciples of all the nations we must bring the gospel to every single creature but it also means that the church of

God can never walk by on the other side and say all his family should look after him or the state should care for him or leave that to the relief agencies because we are the salt and we are the light of the world and that's why Matthew put after the great block of teaching in chapters 5 to 7 Matthew put this great block of healing and this great block of compassion to portray a whole rounded full Christ to us and so we must ourselves throw our weight behind all those movements that make for good and we must exercise this municy of compassion salvation but maybe the most important thing of all is this we must be different we simply must be different otherwise we're useless otherwise the salt has lost its saltness and all of us agree on that on the

Christian difference the tragedy is that so often its meaning has been so emasculated as if the Lord as if the Christian difference consisted in this she doesn't go to certain things and he doesn't go to certain things and the difference is what we don't do and where we don't go the difference lies in the whole area of asceticism of what we so simplistically regard as non-worldiness now I'm saying nothing about the legitimacy or propriety of where we go where we don't go at some levels I haven't very more to that whole question what I'm saying is this that when the Lord spoke of our being different he might being different in terms of the

Beatitudes and sure as we look at the force and impact of that great passage we are not facing some loading of standards I'm not saying to you at all oh you may go to this you may go to that so long as you live the Beatitudes I'm not proposing some easy standard you see the Lord told them what kind of people they were they were they were poor in spirit and they mourned over their sin and they were meek and they were merciful and they were pure in heart and they hungered and thirsted for the kingdom of God and they were different they were different you see because they had different anxieties they're a different God they didn't live for mammon they didn't worry about what they should eat and drink and put on you know there is a terrible danger that we can be

[42 : 05] Protestant ascetics and monastics and yet our careers be far more important to us than the kingdom of God and that's what the Lord is coming back to seek ye first what is the Christian difference the great condition of being salt of being light is that we are mourning over our sins that we are poor in spirit that we are me merciful that we seek first the kingdom of God and you might ask well what on earth influence would little people of that kind have people who start off by being very small people and then make things even more difficult themselves by being meek they have no hope and yet that's what Jesus is saying this man who turned the whole world upside down who stood his seat upon its head and changed the direction by being crucified and that's the secret of Christian power being the men and women of the

Beatitudes now I don't believe that people will ever believe me on this I just want to keep on saying it that the only way we can win this world for Christ is by being this kind of man and this kind of woman that is the difference this is what really matters that all the features delineated for us in this great picture in Matthew 5 in the Beatitudes be true of ourselves now my time is gone I want to ask a last question which is I think of some importance of us where are we going to have this influence what are we going to influence well the Lord says the salt of the earth the light of the world we're going to influence the church are we or going to influence the earth and the world now I put it to you again and I'm sorry that in some levels this is so adversative in its own way

I fear often that the target we have set ourselves is to influence the church to influence the religious community the theological community the Protestant community the reform community I find that many in my circle are absolutely terrified what other evangelicals think of them what Protestants think of them what the reform think of them and I'm asking that for the moment we look at this passage you are the salt of the earth you are the light of the world what does the world think of us what contact do we have with the world what impact do we have upon the world the great vision that God has given to us this morning in these words for our own congregation is this that Bonaccord Free Church exists not to be the salt of the free church or the light of the reformed community or to make a good impression on protestant extremists but it exists to turn the world upside down it exists to transform the academic commercial industrial social political life of Aberdeen not simply to impress its evangelicals and I'm really asking what possibility there is of a quantum leap in awareness so that the person looking over our shoulders that the reformed community has minimal contact with the world makes minimal impact upon that world and that even in those areas where it experiences growth it is doing so either by sideways transference from other reformed congregations or by transference from other

Christian churches but I'm asking this world this poor poor world we are the salt of the earth the whole earth we are the light of the whole world and we have to begin to gear ourselves to that ministry so we are asking not what impact we can have on churches and on religious communities and what impression we can make upon articulate theologians and experts in religion and piety but how can we be salt to the earth how can we be the light of the world and my judgment is that there is no way we can hope to embark upon that enterprise without the voices of our friends in our ears telling us that we are on the wrong track and that by engaging the world we are taking risks we ought not to be taking

[48 : 51] I'm asking you this morning to ponder what Jesus the great teacher is saying I'm asking what influence do we have on the earth and what impact are we making on the world may God help us ask those questions let us pray oh Lord we ask thee to bless thy word to us and to help us rise to its challenge to examine ourselves in its light and help us Lord lest we feel simply defeated and overwhelmed and help us instead to accept that what is thy vision for us may also be thy gift to us hear us for Jesus sake amen our closing praise is psalm 100 the tune is the old hundred the

Lord the whole psalm to God's praise all people that on earth do dwell sing to the Lord with cheerful voice his service whispered his praise for tell come before him and rejoice know that the Lord is God indeed going

Praise God His truth His mercy is forever sure His truth that all times firmly stood As God from this to it endure May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God eternal, be upon each one of us now and everlastingly. Amen.