

“IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF THE WORLD DISCIPLES,” Matt. 5:13-20; Epiphany 5-A, Feb. 9, 2014

I am sure that the name Chuck Colson is familiar to many of you. Formerly known as President Richard Nixon’s “hatchet man,” Colson was the first member of the Nixon Administration to be charged and found guilty of criminal charges because of his intense involvement in the Watergate scandal. Found guilty of an obstruction of justice, he was given a seven month sentence in a federal prison in Alabama. While he was there, at age 42, new reports came out that Chuck Colson had become a Christian. While there were a great many people everywhere who questioned the validity of his conversion, Chuck Colson spent the rest of his life being the salt of the earth and letting his light so shine before others, so that they might glorify the Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16)

Chuck Colson founded a non-profit Christian ministry known as “Prison Fellowship.” Do you know that he received 15 honorary doctorates in the years that followed from various American universities? He was often asked to give commencement speeches; especially at Christian colleges. In one such commencement address, he quoted the great Roman Statesman Cicero, who said: “Without a belief in God, there can be no true justice and concord in the land.”

Chuck Colson went on in that speech to share with his audience two great personal observations. Colson said: (1) Without a belief in God, people will seek to become their own god themselves; and (2) Secondly, without a belief in God people will eventually be overcome by a deep need to gratify their own desires. In other words, they will be powerless in the face of great temptations.

In our Gospel lesson this morning Jesus says to his disciples: “You are the salt of the earth but if the salt loses its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored. It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under the feet of men!” (v. 13)

I. VALUABLE.

In these words Jesus is first of all reminding us how very valuable we are to him as his disciples in this world.

In the ancient world salt was a very valuable commodity; so valuable in fact that a certain allotment of a Roman soldier’s pay was given to him in salt; designated by the Latin word *salarium* from which we derive the English word “salary.” Salt was such a valuable commodity that the highest compliment one might pay to another was to look at that person and say: “You are worth your weight in salt!”

Friends, can you think of any other belief system anywhere that places as high of a value on human life as does Bible? In the Old Testament human beings are reminded that they have been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27); even though it is an image that has been marred by sin.

In Psalm 8 the psalmist is mystified that God would regard human beings so highly! “What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him? Yet you have made him just a little bit lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor! You have given him dominion over the entire earth!”

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself says, “Look at the birds of the air. They do not plant seeds or harvest food and place it in a barn, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they are?” (Matthew 6:28). And then, when Jesus is calling us to be bold in our witness to him and his Word, he goes on to say in Matthew 10, “Are not two sparrows sold two for a penny down at the temple? And yet not even one of them falls from the sky without your heavenly Father taking notice! You are of much more value than they are! ,Why the very hairs of your head are all numbered!”

The greatest demonstration of the high value God places upon human life is to be seen at the cross!

“And when I think that God his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in! That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin!?! Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art! How great thou art!” (LSB 801:3)

This is when we are truly worshiping: When our souls begin to sing!

II. INFLUENCE.

Secondly, Jesus is reminding us not only of the value that he and his Heavenly Father place upon us. He reminds us that our lives will influence the lives of other people all around us, either for the good or either for the bad! “Birds of feather, flock together!”

Friends, aren’t there those Christians whom you and I know that are so much the salt of the earth and so much the light of the world that even an unbeliever would not dare to tell an off-colored joke in their presence? And yet there are some other Christians, careless about their sanctification, who might be the first to tell an off-colored joke at a social gathering. Over and over again the New Testament pleads with us, “Only let your life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ!”

Just as salt does, Christians are to preserve godly standards in this work. Salt, before the days of refrigeration, was the chief preservative in perishable foods.

The Greek historian Plutarch said that “meat” (the kind that some of us love to cook on the grill when the weather warms up), “is part of a dead body, and left to itself as part of a dead body will spoil. But if it is properly preserved in salt, it will be as if a new soul has been placed into that dead body!”

Salt, back then, even as today was used to enhance the flavor of the food to which it was applied. And yet I know that we live very health conscience society today where salt is identified as a public enemy, in second place only to tobacco. Too much salt contributes to high blood pressure that is hypertension, which may contribute significantly to the possibility of heart attacks, a strokes and kidney disease.

Friends, we may know something about the dangers of salt but forget also that it is one of the most essential minerals needed in the composition of a human body.

But aren’t there some foods that just aren’t any good at all without a dash or two in things like mashed potatoes? Can you really make good mashed potatoes without a liberal amount of salt and pepper?

Salt is very influential both as a preservative and also because of the enhancement of flavor that it may bring to various foods.

III. VULNERABILITY.

Thirdly Jesus is cautioning us against losing our “saltiness,” something that for us again in our day may be hard to contemplate and ponder, because salt today doesn’t usually lose its saltiness. But according to the great New Testament scholar named William Hendrickson, there were times when salt that had been deposited in the rocks around the Dead Sea and in its various lagoons could take on a very stale or alkaline taste, making it absolutely worthless.

To not be useful is one of the fastest ways that any one of us could easily become worthless in the Lord’s service. As the Compassionate Son of God, Jesus went about preaching the good news of the kingdom of God and relieving people of all sorts of infirmities and afflictions and releasing them from the power of the evil one, but he also noticed that some of the scribes and Pharisees were only interested in practicing a legalistic form of religion used primarily to exalt themselves, while all the while leaving them completely numb to all the forms of human suffering and anguish around them.

If you and are truly going to be the salt and light of this world, let's remember the characteristics that Jesus has just highlighted in his beatitudes as being the most important among his disciples. People who are the salt of the earth are poor in spirit. They are merciful. They are peacemakers. People who are the salt of the earth are people who mourn their losses, even as they grieve over the reality of their own sins, knowing that they will be comforted because of the death and resurrection of God's only Son Jesus Christ. People who are the salt of the earth thirst for righteousness and are genuinely here this morning because they want to be filled anew with the Holy Spirit of God.

IV. RESPONSIBLE.

Friends on the night before he died, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ prayed a most important prayer to his Heavenly Father, on behalf of his disciples then and also on behalf of those disciples like you and me here today, who would come to faith in him many years later through their apostolic testimonies given to us in the New Testament. And in that prayer, this is what Jesus prays, ***"I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. The world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in your truth; your Word is truth!" (John 17)***

How we can influence the world then for God? How can we be in the world, but not of the world?

Jesus is answering these questions for us in the Gospel lesson today. We have to be salt and light. **Salt, in order to be effective, has to be mingled with the substance** it is affection, and yet salt is distinct from that substance. **Light, in order to dispel the darkness, must shine upon the darkness,** yet is distinct from the darkness! Let's be very clearly here that when Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he is not inviting any one of us to somehow embark now on a **"Do It Yourself"** religion!

Jesus did not come among us; he tells us here—to abolish the law. Because Jesus was such a merciful and compassionate person, eating in the presence of tax collectors and sinners freely, many of the religious elite thought that we was seeking somehow to nullify the Ten Commandments, when nothing could have been further from the truth.

Nor did Jesus come among us merely to reinforce the law of God; though he does do that for us too. He deepens our understanding of righteousness, telling us that mere outward actions are not enough. True righteousness is a matter of the heart. **Jesus knows that true righteousness is a matter of God's grace.** It is not something that we could ever appropriate and apply to ourselves, no matter how hard we may try. Jesus is talking about the kind of righteousness St. Paul describes in Romans 3:21, where he writes: ***"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction! For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith!"***

The trouble with us is that we tend to focus more on other peoples' sins than we do our own. We falsely imagine that other peoples' sins must be far more damnable than our own, though James tells us whoever breaks the law of God in one point, breaks the whole thing! Again Jesus confronts us, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but cannot see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first remove the log from your own eye, and then you will be able to see clearly to help your brother remove the speck that is in his eye!"

What Jesus is looking for today are the kind of disciples who will be **"IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD DISCIPLES."**

How is this possible? When I believed that God gave me the title for this message this past Thursday morning, shortly after I awakened, I immediately went to my laptop to email the title to Mrs. O'Dell so that she could then type into the church bulletin, so that you here might have some idea what this sermon was going to be about today. The first time I typed it, however, I did so with a "typo" but with a "typo" that may have made for a good title for this message today as well. I typed: "In the Word but not of the World Disciples." And isn't this the only way we can be in the world, but not of the world disciples? It is only by being in the Word that we can be disciples who are in the world but not of the world disciples! "If you continue in my Word, then are you truly my disciples..." (John 8:31-32)

Are you old enough to remember Charles Colson and the Watergate scandal that took place in the early 1970s? After Chuck Colson became a Christian, there was a well-known cartoonist who featured him one day in newspapers all across America. The cartoon captured Chuck Colson dressed in a monk's habit (robe) kneeling in front of the White House with a big sign that said, "Repent," while President Nixon is looking out the White House window saying, "Help call Billy Graham, Colson's got religion!"

You may know that Colson was called to his heavenly home almost two years ago in April 2012. Throughout his life he recalled how he had endured a great deal of teasing and heckling, especially in the first few months following his conversion and his subsequent release from prison. Fifteen years after his conversion this is what he said in a Christian message he shared one Sunday morning: "I can stand here today, fifteen years later, and tell you that I am more certain today of the reality of Jesus Christ than I am of my own life. My faith has been deepened with every passing day. I wouldn't trade the worst day of the last fifteen years for the best day of the forty years that went before it. Don't miss that! Get serious with God! If you don't know him and the Holy Spirit is touching you this morning, surrender!"

"Get serious with God!" Chuck Colson said, "And if you don't know him and the Holy Spirit is touching you this morning, surrender!" *Amen*