

Private Faith In A Public World

Series on the Sermon On The Mount

The town of Bastogne in Belgium was a the scene of one of the most fierce battles of the Second World War. When the German army attacked Bastogne on 20th December 1944, they had 120,000 men. The town was defended by 11,800 American soldiers. One of the units that were sent to defend the town were American paratroopers of the 101st Airborne. These troops were sent into battle in the middle of a winter that was one of the worst in years, wearing only summer uniforms. They had virtually no food, very little ammunition, and hardly any medical supplies. It wasn't long before they were completely surrounded. For a week, these poorly equipped and freezing cold troops were repeatedly attacked by a much stronger force, but they held out. Although completely surrounded, it never crossed their minds that they should surrender. In fact when the German commander issued a formal request for the paratroopers to surrender, Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe of the 101st Airborne, gave him a one word reply. "Nuts".

One of the main reasons that those paratroopers held out at Bastogne was their mindset. They believed they were the toughest and the best soldiers in the United States army. Their training had been incredibly rigorous. Those paratroopers were trained to understand that it was normal to be surrounded. They were trained to expect hardship. They expected to be surrounded, outnumbered and in danger. It was the nature of who they were. This was what they expected as soldiers.

What Followers Of Jesus Should Expect

When Jesus taught his disciples, he wanted them to understand that if they were to follow him, they should expect persecution. They should expect that their life would come under scrutiny in the public arena. It's the nature of being a follower of Jesus. It's unrealistic to be a follower of Jesus and expect to be able to have a private faith. If you live the normal Christian life, that life is going to attract attention, perhaps even persecution. All of the beautiful attitudes have to be lived out in the public arena. It's when you begin to live out the Christian life in the way Jesus intended, that people begin to take notice.

Jesus gave us two pictures which tell us how to live our lives in a world that is absolutely opposed to the values of the Kingdom. This is what he said;

***"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*(Matthew 5: 13 –16)**

Salt and Light

Jesus talked about us being salt in a world that is going rotten, and light in a world that is in darkness. His intention was that just in the same way as salt was used as a preservative for food in his day, so we are to permeate society in such a way that we stop the rot. Jesus is saying that without his disciples living the normal Christian life out in the public world, the world is going to go even more rotten. When we live the normal Christian life, we delay moral and spiritual rottenness.

Ron Bronski had been a member of one of the street gangs in Chicago. A rival gang member had beaten up his brother, so Ronnie decided that he was going to get even. One night he got a pistol and waited for Gary, the guy who had been responsible for his brother's beating. When his moment came he chased Gary and shot him in the back. Ronnie then walked up to Gary, turned him over, and putting the gun to his head, pulled the trigger once more. This time the gun locked up. He dropped the gun and ran. He and his girlfriend packed up and left that night for Portland, Oregon. In Portland, Ronnie got a job, settled down, was befriended by several

Christians, and over time he made a commitment to Christ. His life began to transform. He became a model member of his church and of the community.

But something continued to gnaw at his soul. He knew that although he had been restored in his relationship with God, he had not yet been restored to society. There was still a warrant out for his arrest for attempted murder, and even though the Police had stopped looking for him, Ronnie knew what he had to do. He kissed his wife and children goodbye, took a little bit of hard-earned money, went to Chicago and turned himself in. He knew that he was looking at a very good possibility of being sent to prison for up to 20 years.

When Ronnie went to court he told the judge, "I did it. I'm guilty because not only did I shoot him, I was trying to kill him. But I have become a Christian since, and now I realize that what I did was wrong. I'm sorry for what I did." Listening to Ronnie Bronski in court that day was a cynical atheistic journalist named Lee Strobel. What Ronnie did convinced Lee Strobel that Jesus really does change people, and he became a Christian. Lee Strobel is now an influential Christian writer and Pastor.

How Do We Live As Salt And Light?

Most of us here today probably understand that Jesus expects us to live out our faith publicly. That's not the issue for most of us. The question is how do we do it? I want to give you a few ways that we can be salt and light in the world where God has put us.

1. Be Authentic

You may have heard it said that "You are the only Bible that some people will read." Many of us are the only advertisement for Jesus that people will see. That's why our lives must reflect our message. The fruit of the Spirit that are mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 are the character qualities of Christ that are on display in our workplaces, our families, in our schools and at our businesses. If people see genuine love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our lives, they will be attracted to Christ. You can't produce those qualities by your own effort. They come out of a life where the Spirit of God is in control – out of a daily relationship with Jesus that is genuine. You might be able to fake those things for a while, but unbelievers can spot a phoney a mile off. They know the difference between the authentic and the fake. Be authentic as a person.

2. Be Natural

Living for Christ in a world that is going rotten is a lot easier when we stop trying to be someone other than the person God created us to be. Sometimes we read about these great men and women of God like Billy Graham, Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen, Florence Littauer, Bill Hybels, Andy Stanley or whoever your favourite Christian superstar happens to be – and we try to be like them. Listen – God gave you the personality you have. Why don't you just enjoy being who he made you to be, rather than trying to be like someone else? If we have a personality change or a change in vocabulary or accent as soon as we begin to talk about spiritual matters with someone, its hard to believe that what we have is real. God uses the personality and the gifts that he has given each of us to draw people to him. Look at the different personalities in the New Testament that God used to bring light into dark worlds. Peter was pretty confrontational, and that's how God used him. Paul had a great intellect, and he could debate the truths of the Christian faith in a way that would leave most of us speechless. If you read about the blind man in John 9, he was different again. He wasn't a great theologian. He just said "I don't understand all this, but this is what happened to me. Jesus touched me. I used to be blind, but now I can see!" He just told others what Jesus did for him. Matthew liked to throw parties, so when he wanted his friends to meet Jesus, he threw a party. Andrew wasn't the most verbal person, but when he met Jesus, he ran to his brother Simon and said, "You've got to see this guy!" Tabitha had a serving style of being light in a dark world. When she died, all the widows were crying and showing Peter the clothes she had made for them. God raised her from the dead through Peter! Boy, did she have a story to tell! God uses all of us in different ways to draw people to him according to our personality and gifts.

3. Be Personal

Over the years we have developed all these impersonal ways to try and be salt and light in society such as tracts, religious radio and television, billboards, and bumper stickers. Several decades ago Win and Charles Arn surveyed 14,000 Christians and asked them "What or who was responsible for your coming to Christ and into your church?" This is what they found.

Special need	1-2%
Walk-in	2-3%
Pastor	5-6%
Visitation	1-2%
Sunday School	4-5%
Evangelistic Crusade	0.5-1%
Church programme	2-3%
Friend / relative	75-90%

We take more notice of people we trust than anyone else. For example a man does a heap of research on what car will best suit his needs. He decides that he should buy a Honda Accord – it has good safety ratings, fuel economy, repair records etc. So he goes and tells his neighbour he plans to buy a Honda and the neighbour says "Oh no, my brother-in-law had one of those and it was terrible!" And so what does he do? He buys something else. When we need advice on an important decision or need help with a problem we generally talk to someone we know and trust. If that is true of us, it is certainly true of non-believing people we know. They do not want to talk about personal matters, especially spiritual issues, with just anyone; they want to confide in a friend.

4. Be Vocal

It was St Augustine who said "Preach the Gospel always, if necessary use words". I know what he was getting at. He was making the point that we need to live it, but it's not a choice between either living it or speaking it. It's both. Can you imagine how far the gospel would have spread throughout the world if those early Christians had said – "Hey, we are just going to live pure and holy lives in a dark world and people will come and ask us about Jesus". Can you imagine a romance where you just went out of your way to be nice to the other person, but never expressed anything in words, hoping that the other person would just figure it out? Those of us that are married know that strategy doesn't work. Those early Christians did live pure and holy lives in a dark world, and it was much darker spiritually than the world we live in. But they also spoke up boldly, telling others about how Jesus had transformed their lives and the lives of others. If we are going to stop the decay in our society, we are going to need to speak up. Edmund Burke reminded us so long ago "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

5. Be Patient

It takes time to understand the message, believe it, and act on it. Seldom do people hear the message for the first time and commit their lives to Christ. We must patiently bring people along, step by step. My daughter was telling me recently about her friend Melanie. She made friends with Melanie at Teachers College, and patiently spoke to her about Jesus. It took over five years for Melanie to start following Jesus, but now her life has been absolutely transformed. Melanie commented to us that she was so grateful my daughter had hung in there with her as a friend, even when she hadn't become a Christian.

Last week we looked at the Beatitudes, or the beautiful attitudes. This week we have seen some more "Be" attitudes- be authentic, be natural, be personal, be vocal and be patient. Jesus doesn't expect us to just exist in the world. He expects the world to be transformed by our presence.

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