

Difference in an Age of Sameness

If you have a bible, turn with me to [Matthew 5](#). We'll get there here in just a bit. A while back, I read [an article](#) by a guy named Ben Sixsmith. Which, first off: *awesome* name. I asked my wife if we could name our next kid *Sixsmith*—she said no. And then she reminded me that we aren't having any more kids. So that logic checks out. But this [article](#) was, at least *largely*, about the [phenomenon of celebrity pastors](#). And at the same time, it was [also about an approach](#) to Christianity as a *whole* that Mr. Sixsmith had *observed*. He called it the “with a *twist* of Christianity” approach. Basically, that was the phrase he used to describe people who *claim* to be Christians, but whose lives really don't look very *distinctly* Christian at all. People whose *lives*, if you met them, would probably look nearly identical to any *other* person you met.

The [only discernible difference](#) between these people and the rest of the general population is that, for an hour or two on Sunday mornings, these “Christians” attend a pep rally of sorts with other Christians known as “church.” They show up there, nod their head in agreement with what is said and sung, and then they return home afterwards and go about their lives approximately the same as they would have anyway. So **it's just your normal, run-of-the-mill approach to life, but with a “twist” of Christianity**—almost like you would add a twist of *lemon* to your *sweet tea*. You just sprinkle a little *Jesus* on top of everything you've already got going on.

Now, [what was interesting to me](#) about this article, was to hear what Ben Sixsmith *thought* about this approach to faith. He wasn't a follower of Jesus, so I think I half expected him to really *like* this “with a twist of Christianity” idea. After all, that would mean that it doesn't require very much attention or intentionality to secure an eternity with God: you just approach life like you would anyway, except now you get Jesus' blessing on *top* of it all. But much to my surprise, that *wasn't* his take on this approach to faith at all. Here's what *he* said at the end of the article:

*I am not religious, so it is not my place to dictate to Christians what they should and should not believe. Still, if someone has a faith worth following, I feel that their beliefs should make me feel uncomfortable for not doing so. If they share 90 percent of my lifestyle and values, then there is nothing especially inspiring about them. Instead of making me want to become more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me.*¹

¹ <https://thespectator.com/topic/sad-irony-celebrity-pastors-carl-lentz-hillsong/>

Now, just note for a second **how counterintuitive that quote** is, at least to most of us. According to Ben, Christians whose lives look virtually the same as everyone else's, aren't "especially inspiring" at all to the outside world. In fact, it would seem that to *him*, *faith* becomes more relevant the more *different* it is from the world at large (not the more *similar* it is). To him, faith *should* set a person *apart*. *Otherwise*, it's not really worth *anything* at all, at least in his eyes. And I would argue that Jesus feels much the same way (more on that in a bit).

But **here's why** this idea is so important for us to get as followers of Jesus. **Over the past twenty or thirty years, a shift has taken place, at least in the U.S.** And whether you've *noticed* this shift or not, I can just about *guarantee* that you have felt the *effects* of it. *Twenty or thirty years ago, society in general had a largely positive perception of Christianity. If you were a Christian (it was thought) that probably meant that you were a decent citizen, that you were trustworthy, that you were a morally upright person, etc. (Now we could debate all day long whether or not that was an accurate perception. But it was the perception.) Even if people around you didn't share your faith, they usually at least respected it. Admired it. Looked up to it. They saw your convictions and thought to themselves, "wow—I wish I had the moral fortitude and conviction to live life that way." You were often respected, just by virtue of people knowing you were a follower of Jesus.*

Now, **fast forward with me to today:** the year 2023. *Today*, when someone in your life finds out you are a follower of Jesus, would you say that generally makes them *respect* and *admire* you *more*, as a result of knowing that? *When a co-worker of yours finds out you follow Jesus, is their response, "wow, I'd really like to learn from you how to approach my life and decision-making and, specifically, my sexuality"?* I think at least *generally speaking*, the answer to that would be *no*, right?

Now, we are in the middle of the Bible Belt, so we've still got some remnants of that dynamic from a few decades ago lingering here in Knoxville. But increasingly, that's not really the cultural situation we're in. That is no longer the primary sentiment towards followers of Jesus in today's world. This is the shift I'm talking about. More and more, in today's society, Christians are not seen as more moral and trustworthy than non-Christians; sometimes they're seen as less so. If you're a follower of Jesus today, it's generally assumed that you have a rather outdated view of things like equality and sexuality. That you're sort of "in the way" of our society improving and progressing into what it needs to be. So it's no longer that people see the value in becoming a Christian, and simply find it to be too high of a calling; it's that many people don't see the value in it in the first place.

Now, **Christians and churches have responded** to this new dynamic in a number of different ways. Certain Christians have *dismantled* their faith entirely, choosing to toss out any convictions that feel out of touch with modern society. Certain churches and church *denominations* have done the same, revising their positions on key doctrines to try to alleviate some of the tension. **And the thought there, whether it's said out loud or not, is that if we more closely align our beliefs with society, Jesus will seem more relevant and appealing to society as a result.**

Other church traditions have kept their *beliefs* more or less the same; but they've chosen to **update the container** that those beliefs are held in. They choose to give their faith a make-over on the *outside*; to make Christianity seem more appealing *on the surface*. So we look for ways to make church more *exciting*. We'll install killer lighting rigs in our churches. Maybe some *lasers* and *fog machines* too, just for good measure. We'll hire the *best* musicians there are, we'll have them play *secular* songs on stage from time to time. ~~I specifically remember hearing one pastor a number of years ago bragging that the band at his church could play the song "Thunderstruck" by AC/DC better than AC/DC could—which, first off: I highly doubt that. I mean, AC/DC is AC/DC. But second, even if that's true, is that really something to brag about?~~

Some churches will try to be **relevant with their sermon series**. So we'll do a series about how the gospel is really *just like* one of your favorite movies—and we'll *show the movie* during the church service—with *popcorn*! We'll have our pastor *dress* really well on stage: Gucci, Louis Vuitton, etc. They'll use really hip lingo. They'll know about all the latest TikTok trends and celebrity gossip and use all of that as illustrations in their sermons. This is the route that a lot of churches have taken.

Now please, please: **hear my heart here**. My intention is not simply to dog other churches or church traditions. If you've been around long, you may have noticed that those things aren't really *our* style, and there are reasons for that. But **deep down, I get why these churches want to do stuff like that**. I think behind at least a *lot* of it is a good *core* desire, and that's to reach more people with the gospel.

My concern is that those attempts to reach people with the gospel may be doing more harm than good. My concern is that, in taking that approach, we might be embodying what Ben Sixsmith called "a *twist* of Christianity." My concern is that it is essentially appealing to people by going, "look at how *similar Jesus is*, to all the things you already like! Look at how *similar Jesus is* to all of the things you already prioritize! Look how *cool* and *hip* and *relevant* Jesus is, and he can help you be all of those things too, if you follow him!" That's basically the pitch.

And I'm nervous about us sending *that* message, when **the message of the bible is so much different from that.** The message of the bible is "look at Jesus! Look how *different* he is than everything else! Look how much *better* he is than everything else! Look at how *distinct* he is from the way of the world, and look how much *better* his way of life is than anything you've heard of or tried so far." **That is the message of the bible: not that Jesus is just like us, but that we, by his power, can become more like him.** You see, while **making the church trendier and more socially attractive may feel like a very pragmatic solution in the short term, I don't know that it accomplishes the right things in the long term:** I don't know that it gets us very far down the road of helping people become more like Jesus.

For that, I actually think a **very different approach is needed.** To reach the world with the gospel, I actually **don't think we need to be more like the world; I think we need to be more like Jesus.** For Christianity to be appealing, to be *attractive*, it actually **doesn't need more sameness with the world; it needs more difference from the world.** And if articles like the one we read from earlier are correct, that will actually draw more people to it, not away from it.

But to be honest, this idea of **difference isn't original to me** or to Ben Sixsmith; it was actually *Jesus'* idea all along. So with all of that in mind, take a look with me in your bibles at **Matthew 5**, starting in v. 13. *Jesus*, speaking to *followers* of Jesus, says this:

13 "You—and that word "you" is *plural* in the original language, so in East Tennessee dialect it would be "y'all"—**y'all 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 underfoot.**

Okay, so **salt, in Jesus' day**, was sometimes used as *seasoning* like we use it today—to add *flavor*. But more *often* than that, it was used as a **preservative**. In a world before any type of refrigeration, you needed *some* way to keep food fresh and edible for longer—specifically, *meat* that would otherwise go bad. And one common way of doing that was to *salt* the food. The physical *properties* of salt would remove *moisture*, which significantly slowed down the rate at which bacteria could grow and spoil the food.

So **when Jesus turned to the crowds that day** as he was teaching and said "y'all are the *salt* of the earth," people would've immediately had a picture in their heads of what he meant. He meant that they were called to be a type of *preservative* for culture at large. They were called to keep the world from "going bad," so to speak. **Now, this is important: we aren't called to do that by yelling** at the culture about all the ways it's going bad. We aren't called to do that by condemning and arguing with the culture on our

social media accounts. We aren't called to do that by withdrawing from society altogether and ranting among ourselves about how *bad* the world has gotten.

None of that is what Jesus has in mind here. Because none of that is how *salt* preserves food. How does salt preserve food? **By existing in close proximity to the food, but maintaining its own distinct physical properties.** So then: how should we preserve society? By existing in close proximity to it—even *within* it—but remaining different and distinct *from* it. **By being a faithful, counter-cultural witness from the culture, within the culture.** This is God's design for how his people should live: as a culture *within* a culture, a *society* within a society—or, as he says next, as a “city on a hill.” Look with me at v. 14:

14 “You (again, “y'all...”) **are the light of the world. A town** (or a city) **built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 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.**

So here, we have roughly the same *idea*, but with a couple new word pictures. This time, Jesus says, we are the *light* of the world, or a *city* on a hill. *Cities* at the time were often built with really *visible* material, like white limestone. Which meant that during the *daytime*, the sun would reflect off the stone and the city itself would almost *glimmer* and *shine* in the distance, making it visible from a long ways away. *At nighttime*, the hundreds or thousands of lamps from the city's inhabitants would collectively give the entire city a warm *glow* against the night sky.

And especially if the city was situated on top of a hill, like Jesus mentions, no one would be able to miss it. In fact, you would see it from miles and miles away. So travelers, out in the wilderness, exhausted and beaten down by the harsh conditions of the desert—they would see a city in the distance and they would see *survival. Respite. Resources.* A city on a hill meant *life and hope and rest.* Jesus is saying **that is what his followers are called to be.** The light of the world. A city on a hill. Such that people who have been chewed up and spit out by the way of the world can find rest and and hope healing. That's what we're called to be. So, Jesus says, in v. 16:

16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

So *here's why* he's calling us to be different in the first place. We're not just called to be different for *different's* sake. And we're *certainly* not called to be different for our *own*

sake.² **Salt and light both exist for the benefit of what's around them.** For the food they're preserving, and for the darkness they are shining light into. **'So in the same way,' Jesus says, 'let your differentness show before others, so that they might see your differentness, and glorify (or worship) God as a result.'** That's the goal. That's why we're here. Make sense?

Okay. *But* at the same time, **let's remember** that the *first* metaphor—**salt—came with a warning**. Jesus said that if “salt loses its saltiness,” it’s “no longer good for anything.” In other words, if followers of Jesus cease to be discernibly different from the society around them, then there is no longer anything compelling or helpful about them. **Or, in the words of Ben Sixmith, “there is nothing especially inspiring about them.”** For salt to serve its purpose, it must remain *salt*. For light to serve *its* purpose, it must remain *light*. If either of those things lose their distinction—their *discernible difference*—from their surroundings, they *cannot* serve their purpose. **But when they do maintain their difference and distinction, they operate just like God intended. The world is made better, and God is glorified, as a direct result of all of it.**

So **the question we're trying to answer** in this series is this: *in what ways specifically are we called to be a “city on a hill”?* *How are we called to be different from the world, for the sake of the world?* That's the question. And not to put it too broadly, but the answer is...*in all the ways*. There is virtually no limit to the ways we are called to be different and distinct from the world around us. Every arena of our life, every *aspect* of our hearts and minds, we are to be distinct. **In some ways, that's what we do every single week here on Sundays: we unpack one or more ways that we are called to stand out from the world as followers of Jesus.** That's *always* our goal.

But **at the same time**, I also think there are a **handful of especially timely** ways we are called to be different. Some ways that, right *now*, in the year 2023, our world is **especially in need of a city on a hill**. So what we're going to do for the next five weeks is look at **five specific ways that we as followers of Jesus can and should look different from the world around us**. How we can become the type of church the world needs, *even* and *especially* right now. Beginning next week, here's the plan. We're gonna look at how we can be a community of...

Orthodoxy in an Age of Ideology

A community of **Presence in an Age of Distraction**
A community of **Intercession in an Age of Complaint**
Self-Responsibility in an Age of Blame-Shifting, and

² See specifically Jesus' warnings against this in Matthew 6:1 and following.

Peace in an Age of Panic

There's our roadmap for the next month or so. / Now, before we go any further, let me just try and get ahead of something real quick. All my cards on the table, I am not doing this series because I *don't* think our church is good at being different from the world. That's not it at all. In fact, it's rare that a week goes by where I and the other leaders here don't hear stories and reports of just how refreshingly different y'all are. How God is using your commitment to living differently in order to draw people in and show people what Jesus is like. One of the most consistent pieces of feedback we get from new people at City Church is that the community here is just "different." Not that the music is awesome, or that the preaching is killer—as much as it would soothe my ego to hear them say that—but that the people here are refreshingly different. And that's exactly what we want to happen. That's exactly what we're aiming for.

So that's not the angle behind this series at all. Rather, what we're attempting to do over the next five weeks is this. We simply want to be reminded of that call for us to be different, and highlight a few ways that we might not have considered needing to be different. So the call for followers of Jesus to be different from the world never changes; it's the same from generation to generation. But at the same time, I believe in each new generation—in each new cultural "moment"—there are certain ways that our differentness is especially needed. Given the shape of the society around us, the things people are most inclined towards right now, there may be specific ways that our world especially needs examples of a better way forward. And that's what we want to lay out for you in this series. Make sense?

So here's where I want us to go for the remainder of our time today. I want to take you to two different places in the Scriptures and talk about two different things. First, I want to give you one more reason...

Why we are different

So there's one more, really important, reason that we pursue distinction from the world as followers of Jesus. And it actually goes back further than Matthew 5, goes back further than Jesus' ministry, goes back further than even the New Testament or the Old Testament. It goes all the way back to the very character of God himself. I'm going to read it to you from the book of 1 Peter chapter 1, where Peter says it this way:

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."³

³ 1 Peter 1:15-16

Okay. Sometimes I think people get a little intimidated by that word “holy.” To many of us, it reeks of moral *superiority* and *self-righteousness*. But do you know what the word *holy* actually means? It means “different.” The word there in 1 Peter is the Greek word *hagios*. For something to be *hagios* means that it is *set apart* for a special purpose and is therefore different, distinct, and distinguished from other things around it.

So *here, in 1 Peter*, the instruction to followers of Jesus is *this*: be *holy*—be *different*, be *distinguished*, be set apart—because God is holy. Because *he* is different. *He* is distinguished. *He* is set apart. **The reason for why we are called to be different is simple: because *his* holiness is *deserving* of our own holiness. *His* distinction is *deserving* of our own distinction.** Difference *starts* with God’s own character: **when we encounter a God who is entirely different from anything the world has on offer, it motivates and inspires *us* to become entirely different from anything the world has on offer.** Holiness starts with God himself.

And listen: *all of that shapes the kind of different* we become. Because the point isn’t just to be a unique individual. *Our world is full of people that so badly want to be unique individuals, that they end up being identical to all the other people who want to be unique individuals. Let that sink in.* But that’s not what we’re talking about here. We’re not talking about being unique for its own sake. **We are talking about being set apart and different in the way that God himself is set apart and different.** We’re talking about being *holy*. About being set apart for a specific, God-given purpose. About becoming a “city on a hill.” About allowing our light to shine before others, such that they see that light, and “glorify our God in heaven.” That’s *why* we choose to be different.

So, the *second question...*

What makes us different

How do we *become* different? For that, let’s look on the screen at *Romans 12, v. 1-2*:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

So *verse two there* is just *Paul’s own way of echoing* our big idea from this morning: that followers of Jesus should be *different from* the world around them; not the *same* as the

world around them. But **I also** want us to focus in on v. 1. Specifically, I want you to notice the word “*therefore,*” and the phrase, “*in view of God’s mercy.*” **Before Paul says anything about being transformed, or being different, he says all of that comes from understanding God’s mercy towards us.** And **if you’ve ever read through** the book of Romans, you know that prior to chapter 12 are *eleven full chapters* about God’s mercy towards us in Jesus. **I want to just read you** a few selected passages from those eleven chapters, just because I want to make sure we see this. Here’s **Romans 3**:

*But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*⁴

Here’s **Romans 4**:

*He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*⁵

Romans 5:

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.*⁶

Romans 6:

*Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*⁷

Romans 7:

*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*⁸

⁴ Romans 3:21-22

⁵ Romans 4:25

⁶ Romans 5:1-2

⁷ Romans 6:8-11

⁸ Romans 7:24-25

And Romans 8:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Here's **my point**: Romans 1-11 reads like a "greatest hits" of all the most incredible things God has done for you and me in Jesus. And *then*, after all of that in chapters 1-11, Paul takes a deep breath and says in chapter 12: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy..." here's how I want you to live.

Here's **why it is so important that we get that**. If you *miss* the word "therefore" in Romans 12, you completely misunderstand how we become different as followers of Jesus. You start to believe that it's something you have to *achieve*, rather than something you are *given*. If you miss those two pieces of Romans 12:1, you get a completely de-formed view of what the Christian life is all about. **Difference is not something God asks you to do because he needs you; it's something he gives you the ability to do because he loves you.** Remember: "be holy, because I am holy." That is a very *different* way of thinking about being *different*.

So, here's **how we become different** as followers of Jesus, according to Romans. We *familiarize* ourselves with God's grace to us towards Jesus, and then, according to Paul, we "*renew our minds*" daily *in* it. By "renewing our minds," here's what I think he means: we practice recognizing that *this* is the one true story about the world. And therefore, the one true story about *us*. *When we make financial decisions, we renew our minds in the gospel. When we make relationship decisions, we renew our minds in the gospel. When we make decisions about sex and sexual expression, we renew our minds in the gospel. When we make decisions about how to spend our time and who to spend our time with, we renew our minds in the gospel.*

In **each and every arena of our life**, we allow the good news of Jesus to be our homing device. We return, over and over again, to ask: who is Jesus? What has God done for me *through* Jesus? And how does *that* shape what I choose to do, and not do, *here*? That is in essence, what following Jesus, is. // Now, that's *theory*. So let me do my best, with the little bit of time we have left, to give you two tangible *case studies* of how that might work itself out.

First, let's go ahead and deal with a **really important one** in our day and age: our **sexuality**. When making decisions that have to do with sex, it is easy to be "*conformed to the pattern of this world.*" Whether you say it outloud or not, whether it's at a *conscious* level or a *subconscious* level, the pattern of the world sounds something like this: *who I*

have sex with doesn't really matter. Sex is just recreation for adults. As long as I enjoy it and the other person gives consent, there's nothing wrong with it. That is the "pattern of this world."

But, here's what renewing your mind in the message of the gospel sounds like. In the words of 1 Corinthians 6, my body wasn't made for sexual immorality, but for the Lord. My body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. God raised Jesus from the dead, and will raise me too. So sex is actually way more than just play for grown-ups; it's a way of uniting my entire person—mind, body, soul, spirit, psyche—with another person to experience true intimacy with them. So should I take my body and offer it to anyone and everyone? No. Because I, and my body, are far too important, too purposeful for that.

Now, just as important, is renewing your mind in the gospel retroactively, whenever shame about sexual sin sets in. Then, we renew our minds in truths like Romans 8: where it says that neither height nor depth, angels nor demons, life nor death, nor anything else in all of creation is able to separate us from the love and acceptance of Jesus. So whereas the pattern of this world would be to run and hide from any amount of shame, the gospel would tell me there's no reason to run and hide. But in both cases, proactive and reactive, what we are doing is renewing our mind in the truths of the gospel. That's where difference comes from as followers of Jesus. Make sense?

Okay. One more example. This time let's talk about finances. When putting together a budget for ourselves or for our family, we could allow ourselves to conform to the pattern of this world. Which would sound something like this: the more stuff you have, and the better and nicer stuff you have, the more happy you will be. So max out that credit card. Buy the biggest house you can afford and then some. Spend as much money as possible on fun gadgets and technology and fun experiences, because that's where life and joy and meaning is found.

But, here's what "renewing your mind" in the message of the gospel looks like. In the words of Jesus from Luke 12, it sounds like realizing that "life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions."⁹ Life does not consist, is not found, in how much stuff you have. Or how nice your stuff is. The message of the gospel reminds us that our money was not given to us primarily for our own pleasure or our own comfort; it was given to us for God's purposes. And, the Scriptures tell us, there is freedom in realizing that no amount of possessions will ever feel like "enough." The gospel breaks that cycle of always needing more. It tells us that it is more blessed to give than to receive.¹⁰

⁹ See Luke 12:15

¹⁰ See Acts 20:35

Through the gospel, Jesus invites us into an altogether better way to view our money and possessions.

That's what it looks like to "renew our minds" in the good news of Jesus. And *that* is where the ability to live differently comes from. So here's what I want us to do this morning as we wrap up. I'm gonna ask the band to come back up. If you've got a bible or journal out, feel free to put that away. And once you do that, I want you to bow your head and close your eyes. Once you do that, I've just got a question I want us to consider together. (*Give people a moment to do this*). Okay—here's the question I want us to press into together. I want us to ask *God, in what way do I most need to renew my mind* in the gospel? In what way do I most need to renew my mind in the gospel, right now?

Or, to ask it a different way, where do I most need to learn how to be different from the world around me? I want you to just think about your life. Think about the various facets of your life: your career, your time, your money, your sexuality, your relationships, your friendships, your family life. Your free time, your mental health, your physical health. Could be most anything. But I want you to just ask the Holy Spirit, *God: where is my mind in need of renewal?* We are of the belief here at City Church that we serve a speaking God. That God himself speaks to us for our good and for his glory and that when we ask him things along those lines, he is faithful to answer. So with that expectation, I want you to ask him: *what is it?* (*Pause*)

Maybe for you this is a very overwhelming question. Because it almost feels like the answer is "everywhere." And that's fine; that might be good self-awareness. But I also believe in the *tenderness* of the Holy Spirit. I believe that he doesn't really have a habit of dumping a hundred things on our lap and going "good luck with that." I believe that he engages us at the level we have the capability to process and apply. And he walks with us as we address it. So he might just have *one* thing this morning—one area of your life—he wants to engage you on. And then later, he'll engage you on something else, and then something else. And he'll walk with you through *all* of that. So this morning, maybe you just ask, "where do I start, God?" What do you want me to start working on *today*?

(*Pray to conclude, transition to communion*)