

# The Kingdom Under Pressure

Good morning everyone, it's great to see all of you. My name is Eric and I am a pastor in training here at City Church. If I haven't had the chance to meet you yet I would love to be able to do that. If you're just joining us or you need a bit of a refresher, we are just a few weeks into our study through the book of Matthew. We are taking some time to work all the way through Matthew in "installments" of sorts. If you haven't already listened to the first few sermons from the series, I would highly encourage you to do so because they build pretty well on each other and help paint a bigger picture of where we are at this point. That being said, if you're paying close enough attention you'll notice the passage we're covering today doesn't exactly follow chronologically based on where we were last week and where we'll be next week. This morning I'm going past verses 1-10 and picking up at verse 11. The reason being honestly serves no purpose much other than it was better for our schedules to do it like this and Kent is going to come back to verses 1-10 next week. So go ahead and grab your bible and turn to Matthew chapter 5.

So, like I said we're a few weeks in and we've gone through an introduction to the book of Matthew as a whole, we talked about John the Baptist, we talked about *who* Jesus is as a king and what his kingdom looks like. Then last week Kent helped us get really practical about the *ministry* of the kingdom. So today, we are going to be talking through a portion of what is called Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount," which I honestly see as an attempt to make "Jesus teaching some people on that hill over there" sound a little fancier, but that's not the point. But before we get to that, I want to start things off today with a question. Sadly, it is not my question but I'm the one asking it today so I will take at least some credit. There was a book written by a guy named Larry Hurtado, who is a PhD and an expert on the history of the early Church. And his book is titled **Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?** I guess because sometimes coming up with short book titles is just too hard. But the question he asks, I think, is a very valid one. In the first, second and third century A.D. there were very few cultural advantages to being a Christian. Being a Christian brought you guaranteed persecution and somewhere around a 50/50 chance of being killed. At the same time, Christianity grew exponentially during this time period. So it begs the question **why?**

Well in part, Hurtado's book says that it's because of the teachings of Jesus, and specifically those highlighted in the **Sermon on the Mount**. It's hard to be exactly sure, but we think that much of what the Church did during this time period when they met together was read and teach excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount. Which, as a side note, means that what we're going to do as a church for the next couple weeks is on

some level very similar to what the earliest Christians did. And really what this is, is kind of Jesus' manifesto for who exactly he's called his people (the Church) to be. It's organized by topic, so he covers everything from morality to sexuality to money to anxiety, and a ton of other stuff. And Matthew's purpose in organizing all of this together is so that we get a **detailed picture of the type of people** group Jesus wants us to become.

It seems **like a good idea** to me, that if teaching through this passage helped the early Church discover who they were called to be, might be a good idea for us to dive into this passage too. Because apparently on some level it worked, since you and I are sitting here today at a church service.

Today's **passage is part of the intro** to that sermon. Those of you who are readers, you know how valuable it is to read the introduction of the book. In the introduction, the author usually unpacks what they're setting out to do in the book as a whole. So today, Jesus is going to unpack his big idea, his thesis—and then the rest of the sermon will be him drilling that down into specific topics and getting really practical. But today, we'll just cover part of the intro.

So let's start reading in Matthew 5, v. 11:

*[11] "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Okay, so on the surface, it might sound like these two verses belong in the previous passage that we'll cover next week, the one with all the "blesseds" in it. But I think what's happening here is that Jesus is actually pivoting from talking about the crowds to talking about the disciples. He has just listed out different types of people who are blessed, and now he starts speaking directly about his disciples, and says "blessed are YOU, when you experience persecution, because your reward is great in heaven." Now you might still wonder, "what does **that** have to do with us being salt & light—what he gets into next?"

Here's what I think it has to do with it. When you and I are persecuted—so mistreated or excluded or misunderstood as followers of Jesus—or when we **anticipate** being persecuted because of that, we have a couple different knee-jerk reactions to that experience. Christians have a couple different coping mechanisms we run to in

response. And what Jesus is about to do is point those two responses out, and show how they are inconsistent with what we're called to be as followers of Jesus. So in the verses that follow, Jesus is going to give us two metaphors for who we're called to be, and then show how our gut reactions to persecution prevent us from being each of those things. Let's keep reading in verse 13:

*[13] "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."*

So here is our first metaphor or word picture for who we are called to be: **salt**. With the information we know about salt in that day, he might be referring to one of many uses. He might be talking about salt as flavoring much like we use salt today. We put it in all kinds of food to enhance flavors. He might be talking about salt as a means of preservation which was incredibly important before the invention of the refrigerator. You could use salt to preserve food so bacteria can't grow as quickly and it lasts longer. He could even be talking about salt as fertilizer—salt was used for all of those things and more in his day. But regardless of what specific use he has in mind—here's what we *do* know. For salt to do what it's supposed to do, it has to be different from its surroundings. For salt to add flavor, it can't taste exactly like the food you're putting it on—that's pointless. For salt to preserve, it can't have all the same bacterial properties as the thing it's supposed to preserve. For salt to fertilize, it has to have different properties than the thing it's fertilizing. For salt to do what it needs to do, it has to be different. And that's the point Jesus is making here. For the community of Jesus to be what it needs to be in the world, it has to be different from the world around it.

There are going to be times where we don't do things that everyone else does. There are going to be times where we're called to do things that no one else will. Believing that sex belongs in the context of marriage rather than thinking it belongs whenever and with whomever you feel like—that's different. Believing that our money is meant to be used for generosity and serving others rather than being exclusively about how much stuff we can accumulate, that's different. Believing that our resources and our homes are meant to be a means to develop relationships with and serve other people sacrificially, not just meant to be something we use primarily for ourselves, that's different. *So, recently a guy in my LifeGroup who has been coming around for a while brought up his thoughts when he first started coming around. He'd been involved in church and small groups in the past, but he recently told us after his first night, he went home and told his wife, "this is super weird, these people are *actual* friends. Like they talk about deep stuff and are actually real friends during the week." It was something *different* he hadn't seen before in that context. It was different to see a group of people from many different walks of life and different stages of life come together and have deep, meaningful relationships when the main thing we had in common was Jesus.*

But, Jesus says, there is a way that **salt can go bad**. Look back at v. 13:

*...but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.*

Jesus says there is one way for salt to become ineffective—and that's for it to **lose its taste**. That word “taste” isn't actually the best translation—the word actually just means its *power* or *potency*. Jesus says that if salt loses the very thing that makes it salty, if it loses the thing that makes it *different*, it can no longer do its job.

This is the **first error** that the Church sometimes makes. We'll call it **“losing your saltiness”**. And just to clarify, I'm not talking about being salty in the way a lot of people talk about it today when you just get mad at everyone all the time. That's called being a jerk, and I would strongly encourage losing that tendency, especially as a follower of Jesus. What I mean by “losing your saltiness” is casting aside anything and everything that makes you *different* because of your faith in Jesus. With losing your saltiness, what sometimes happens is that in an effort to make Christianity more attractive to people, we adjust our lifestyle to look more and more like everybody else. We start handling our money like everybody else. We start parenting our kids just like everybody else. We practice our sexuality just like everybody else. And before long, we lose any amount of distinctiveness about us. And at some point, we make it seem like to be a follower of Jesus is really just doing everything in your life exactly the same—you just attend a church service once a week. Which to be honest seems like a pretty weird hobby. The Church just becomes a slightly sterilized version of the rest of the world—and to that people on the outside correctly say “no thanks. Why would I want that?” Which is exactly how Jesus said it would work: that salt becomes no longer good for anything. If we look exactly like the rest of the world, we add nothing of value to the world. A lot of the time we think we're making Christianity **more** appealing by doing this, but in reality we're actually just removing any reason people would be drawn to it.

So let's be honest for a second, there are **things** about what we believe as followers of Jesus that just **aren't so easy to swallow**. We believe that a guy was born to a virgin mom, performed miracles, was murdered and then came back from the dead, and now tells us that if we'll admit we're sinners and deny ourselves, he'll bring us back from the dead too. Can we just admit real quick that there are easier things in the world to get on board with? There are things like this and others that are difficult for people on the outside to agree with or like.

But we **like to be liked**. So at times what the Church has done is gone “well, I tell you what—maybe Jesus didn't really mean that thing about denying yourself and carrying your cross. You know there's a lot of different translations of what he said there, and we're not even sure what the word for “denying” meant and we think maybe in the Greek

it just means that Jesus is rooting for you and thinks you're awesome and he wants you to do everything that just makes you happy." And we start to tweak and adjust what Jesus said to make it a little more palatable and a little more mainstream. And before you know it we've got a whole different creation that we call Christianity but actually doesn't even remotely resemble what Jesus had in mind.

I really feel this and it was extra obvious to me in the past few weeks. I recently started working here at City Church, which means I just finished up at my previous job. When I was telling coworkers and people I interacted with through my job, I had this subtle thought in the back of my head of, "maybe they won't ask where I'm going or what I'm doing next."

It was the strangest thing, because I'm incredibly excited to be here, but I still had a subtle sense of feeling like the conversation would turn awkward or uncomfortable as soon as I told them I was working at a church. And it wasn't a huge deal and I didn't *not* tell people, but it's definitely revealing about my tendency towards trying to avoid awkwardness as a result of following Jesus. As soon as someone hears I work at a church, all sorts of assumptions and opinions could start flooding people's minds and instead of letting that happen, I'd rather them still see me the same way they did before.

So here's the question for us: **if you took away** church on Sundays and LifeGroup attendance in your life, would your life look any different from someone who doesn't follow Jesus?\* So the average person you work with or go to class with—who doesn't have any idea what you do with your Sunday mornings—would they be able to think back on their interactions and their relationship with you and go "yeah, there's something distinct and different about them"? Even if they wouldn't quite be able to articulate what it is yet, would they say "there's something refreshingly different" about you?

That's what it means for us to be "salt" as followers of Jesus, but Jesus says that the irony is that the **more your goal is to fit in** and be accepted with the culture around you, the more you actually lose the distinctiveness that you're called to be in the world. By trying to be more desirable, you actually lose the thing that is meant to be most desirable about you—that you're *different*.

But let's keep going, because that's **not the only error** the Church makes. In fact, we often swing the pendulum the exact opposite way. Look at v. 14:

[14] *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.*

In the first century, **if you were traveling on foot with no electricity**, you knew you were close to a city because it's where all the lights were—not 21st century lights but candles and torches and such. In fact I was reading the other day that the light from a single candle—just one candle—can be seen from up to thirty miles away if there's nothing else

in the way. So in the first century, if you were traveling on foot, it would be absolutely pitch dark, except for the cities. And you could **see the cities** from miles and miles away.

So Jesus says we as **his people are a city set on a hill**. That people should see something about who we are and go “oh they must be followers of Jesus.” They should see that distinctiveness that we just talked about and go “oh that’s different.” They should see how we think about marriage differently, how we think about relationships differently, how we think about food and alcohol differently and be drawn to it like a weary traveler is drawn to a well-lit city.

But Jesus says there’s a way that **light can render itself useless** too. Look at v. 15:

*[15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.*

Okay, so what does Jesus mean by that? I think Jesus here is getting at the **other error** that we sometimes make in our relationship to the world around us. We’ll call this one **hiding your light**. What sometimes happens, **often in response to the other error** of jumping in and looking exactly like the surrounding society, is that you’ll hear Christians say stuff like “as Christians we’re called to be set apart and holy! We can’t just go on looking just like the world, we need to be different!” And I (obviously) agree with the statement, but disagree with how that often gets applied. Because a lot of times what they mean is let’s round up the wagons, keep to ourselves, and close ourselves off from the rest of the world. They think since the world is so seductive and powerful and worldly, what we really need is to get away from the world so that we can be different. Jesus compares this to hiding a lamp under something so you don’t see any of the light. And a light that doesn’t put off light is pretty useless. It no longer functions as it is meant to.

There are **obvious examples** of this, where certain sects of Christianity have completely separated from the world, forbidding technology and cars and anything that could possibly lead towards “worldliness.” But there are lesser examples too. We do this when we live our daily lives all within the confines of **Christiandom**. We go to Christian coffee shops and only watch Christian movies and only read Christian books and go to a Christian mechanic and a Christian dentist.

We do this when we **only ever hang out** with other followers of Jesus—when we form a “Christian bubble” as it’s often called. We do this when our churches become cliques that are difficult for other people to belong to—we do this when we don’t show hospitality by welcoming other people in and going to them with the good news of the gospel.

We do this all the time. For college students, it would be incredibly easy to look at campus at large and all the darkness that is prevalent and just find a small group of other

Christians, live in that bubble, and never interact with anyone who doesn't follow Jesus. Be comfortable, make Christian friends, and call it a day. We also see this when people think the primary purpose of parenting children is to protect them from the "big bad world." And I get that. There are plenty of things in our world that are scary or dangerous or plain messed up that would be easier to just keep away. We could surround kids with Christian friends and Christian activities and keep them busy doing Christian things because we don't want them making mistakes or being influenced in negative ways. And please don't mishear me: I am not saying protecting kids is a bad desire, it's a great one. But I think we've got to be careful anytime we make a habit of taking ourselves out of the world altogether, because we're actually called to be light to the world. The world can be a dark place, no doubt about it. But that's because it needs some light.

So what is the alternative? If we've got to make sure we're different *and* we've got to make sure we aren't separating from the world in order to *be* different, how do we walk that line? How do we steer clear of both common errors? This is what Jesus says in v. 16:

*[16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Jesus says, instead of taking yourself out of the world, do quite the opposite. Let others get a glimpse of how you live your life as distinct and different, so that they can come to know the reason behind it. So that they can come to know the God that makes it all possible.

This has so many beautiful and practical implications. Let's say you're hanging out with some classmates or some coworkers and someone starts talking about someone who isn't there in a negative light. So people start gossiping about this person and someone in the group asks what you think. There's a few options here: one option is that you just hop right in and gossip like everybody else (that's salt losing its saltiness). Or you could just decide to never hang out with that group of non-believers ever again because you're worried that if you do, you might get sin "on you" (that's putting your light under a basket). Or instead, you could continue hanging out with them, quietly resist the urge to gossip with them, and subtly model for them a more honoring way to talk about other people. That's letting your light shine before others.

It could look like co workers sitting around talking about how much they're investing in their 401k and what their stock portfolio looks like because they pump all their money into it and they ask about you. You could respond with some of the same things and use all of your finances as a means of personal comfort and leisure ("salt losing its saltiness"), or you could avoid it entirely like in the previous example (putting your light under a basket). Or you could tell them about how you give sacrificially to the local church and to other people and organizations because your money is a tool to be used

for good and not a personal resource to amass and lavish yourself with. There are incredibly beautiful and powerful things that can happen in our world when we give financially and sacrificially to help create change.

Let's say you're a follower of Jesus, but you have quite a few friends who aren't followers of Jesus, and they regularly go out drinking for the express purpose of getting drunk. Now you could just go out drinking and getting drunk with them, because you want them to like you and accept you (that's salt losing its saltiness). Or you could go "I'm never going to associate with them ever again because that's sin and I'm uncomfortable being around sin" (that's hiding your light under a basket). Or you could decide to continue spending time with them, either in settings where the goal **isn't** to get drunk (if that's a struggle for you in those settings), or even in those settings (if it isn't a struggle for you), in hopes that they might see in you a more healthy relationship with alcohol and social gatherings (letting your light shine).

It could be a situation where you look at our society as a whole and see large groups of people being systematically and institutionally repressed and harmed. "Salt losing its saltiness" here could be actively perpetuating those institutions and societal structures because some of the things that are in place disproportionately benefit you as an individual. And because of that, you're okay with helping those disparities continue or even grow. "Putting your light under a basket" could look more like seeing everything that's happening and thinking, "I don't really think it's as bad as people are saying it is, and I don't think I'm actively hurting anyone," or, "jumping into that conversation seems pretty uncomfortable and difficult" and staying silent altogether. Or, you could look at the immense damage and hurt that is caused to so many people and you could do something more like what Jesus would do and actively speak out against injustice, mourn with those who mourn, and take active steps to push back against the deeply painful inequities and inequalities we've created as a society.

Historically followers of Jesus have done this in many ways, even if sometimes it gets drowned out by examples to the contrary. In the early days of the church, the Roman empire was known for having places where people could take **unwanted babies** and leave them to die from what they called "exposure." Into that broken reality came the church. The church spoke out about exposure and made it clear that that wasn't an acceptable way to treat children, but they did more than that too—Christians would go to the known locations of exposure, and take the unwanted babies home with them to be their own. There were no adoption agencies back then—just the Church. They "preserved" that part of society. There are other stories of the early church caring for the poor. In fact at one point, the **Emperor Julian** of Rome was attempting to get rid of Christianity (and Christians) from the Empire, but he started realizing he couldn't, because of how well Christians cared for the poor and outcasts. He said "I can't get rid of the Christians, because if I did there would be riots. Christians take care of their own poor, and everyone else's poor as well."

Historically, followers of Jesus have **shined** during epidemics and pandemics, by caring for the sick and giving dignity to the dead and going into areas of sickness to care for them instead of fleeing like everyone else. Historically, followers of Jesus have been on the front lines of fighting for justice along racial lines. Historically, the Church has led the charge in fighting against all types of modern day slavery, including sex trafficking. There are incredible stories over the years of the Church doing exactly what Jesus teaches—bringing light into darkness. So if you pay any attention at all to anything that is currently happening in our world, you'll see how this concept—us being salt and light—is arguably more pertinent now than any other time in our lifetimes.

The purpose of going out of our way to look different than the world around us isn't just to pat ourselves on the back for being "good Christians." We don't just talk about being different as if we're trying to make others look or feel bad for not being like us. We do it because it shows the beauty and transformative work of the cross. We have the opportunity to live our lives as a billboard for the gospel and the love and grace we've been shown. It's not about being perfect or living a perfect life, it's about living a life that displays the amazing transformation God has brought about in us through his grace in sending Jesus on our behalf to live the perfect life we can't live.

If you've been coming around our church for a while and are involved in LifeGroups, serving others, being on mission, I'll say **you guys do an incredible job** of this. I can't tell you how many stories we've heard of relationships you're building with people in Knoxville that sound just like you being salt and light. So hear me say, if that's you, I want to encourage you to continue to actively participate and continue to grow. I don't know if you've ever thought about it this way, but if you are a follower of Jesus, you are a part of God's one and only plan to fix what is broken in our world. The Church being salt and being light is THE METHOD God has put forward for his kingdom becoming a reality on earth. The Church is God's plan A, and there is no plan B.

So with that in mind, let's take a good long look at our lives. Could you say, with all sincerity, that you have a pattern of being salt, and being light. Could you say, with all sincerity, that your life looks noticeably different than other people in your circle of friends, in your classes, in your workplace? Could you say that you're allowing your light to shine before others? I'm not asking if you are perfect at it. I'm not saying do you never mess up. But I am saying, is there a consistent effort in your life of A) living differently, and B) letting that light shine before others, in the hope that they might see that, and eventually glorify God because of it?

And if not, what might need to change? If your standard of living and lifestyle looks exactly the same as someone who isn't a follower of Jesus who makes the same amount of money, what might need to change? If your weekend activities look exactly the same as everyone in your graduating class, what might need to change? If the way you spend all your time outside of work looks exactly the same as all your coworkers, what might need to change? What aspects of your life could be distinctly different and beautiful when looked at next to your peers? What ways do you need to allow Jesus through the Holy Spirit to shape your heart and your desires to be more like him?

With all things, Jesus embodied this. Jesus was different: he didn't allow the world to conform him to their image, he didn't take cues from them about how to live—but he didn't think he had to withdraw from the world in order to do that. In fact, he saw it as his responsibility, as the original light of the world, to let his light shine to the world around him. And listen, I'm not saying to look at your life in shame. I want to leave you all with the beautiful picture this truly is. As followers of Jesus, we are *allowed* to participate in what Jesus is doing. Like I said before, we as the Church are God's plan to change the world, to bring light into darkness, to show the beauty of his kingdom as it continues to grow despite the darkness we see around us. Through Jesus' work on the cross, we get to rally together to bring that kingdom to Earth, to begin to see things here, in Knoxville, as it is in Heaven. Let's pray together to that end.