

# WHY ARE YOU HERE?

by Danny Hall

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When I was in my later teen years and a relatively new Christian, God gave me the opportunity to do a few strange and different sorts of things. In fact, my best friend, Mike, and I used to do all kinds of crazy things. Sometimes, on the spur of the moment we would just decide we were going to go away somewhere for the weekend, and we were always ending up in unusual places. We had a tradition: Whenever we got to some new place and into some odd situation that we had never dreamed we would be in, we would look at each other and say, "What are we doing here?"

One of those was the time when he and I went to Panama to do a summer missions program out of a church in the Canal Zone. On the way down, we flew from our home in Atlanta to Miami, where we had to spend the night. We were on Miami Beach in this hotel, and we looked at each other, knowing that we didn't have any idea what we were getting ourselves into the next day, and we said, "What in the world are we doing here?"

That question has stayed in my heart throughout my life. I ask it of myself and I often challenge other people to ask themselves that question. I'm going to ask it of you: What in the world are you doing here? And I want you to think about that at different levels-not only what are you doing right where you are, but what are you doing on earth? We often ignore that question, sometimes we're troubled by it, and sometimes we just never think of it.

In light of that question, we're going to look at Matthew 5. We're going to jump into the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This sermon wonderfully encapsulates the essence of Jesus' teaching as he sought to confront the religious norms of his day, to challenge the nation of Israel and all who would hear and follow him to think differently from the categories they had grown up with in their Jewish heritage. What had been entrusted to them had been twisted and manipulated so that in Jesus' day it had come down to a form of religiosity that was devoid of and often antithetical to the purposes for which it had originally been given. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus challenged people to think about why they did what they did religiously and what was at the foundation of their faith.

Matthew 5:13-16:

**"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."**

In order to understand these verses fully, let's think for a moment about the context. In Jesus' day, the form of religion had taken precedence over the essence of it. Jesus continually challenged his disciples and all those around who would hear him in a desire to call them back to the heart of who God was and what it meant to live for him.

In the opening portion of the Sermon on the Mount, which we call the Beatitudes, he challenged the idea of what it meant to be truly walking with God. Walking with God was usually evaluated according to how much one conformed to the traditions that had been built up over time, which were the outward, external applications of the Law. Myriad rules and regulations had been added, one upon another. So at the top of the heap were people like the Pharisees, who made careers out of following these rules as rigorously as they possibly could. The Beatitudes call into question that notion. Jesus says those who are truly

happy and blessed possess not external qualities of conformity to religion but internal qualities of a radically different nature from normal human nature. People who have a true poverty of spirit (absolute humility before God), people who are meek, people who mourn over the pain and sin in the world, people who are peacemakers, people who hunger and thirst after righteousness—these are the kinds of people who are truly in line with God and are therefore truly happy and blessed. And at the end of that list is this marvelous promise: If you do all this, you will be blessed because you will be persecuted. Jesus knew that if you adopted this kind of perspective on life, submitted yourself to this kind of walk with God, it would be met with opposition on every front because it would be so antithetical to the way people normally lived.

Following the Beatitudes Jesus goes into the teaching we're studying in 5:13-16. His language is not difficult to understand. He uses two very simple metaphors that have profound meaning. Understanding what he's talking about is the easy part. It's living it out that's hard.

### **The essence of being the people of God**

He says to them, "You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world." Let's look at the face-value meaning of these two metaphors. In that day and age, while salt had other functions, its primary use was as a preservative. Long before the technology of refrigeration came along, people had to do something to preserve their food, particularly their meats. The most common method was to rub salt deep into the meat. Light is also a very simple concept. Light dispels darkness and thus makes things visible; it makes the way clear. Jesus is saying, "You are the salt, that which arrests the corruption of the world. And you are light, that which dispels the darkness." The underlying assumption is that the world in which we live is characterized by corruption and by darkness. What he is saying, then, is that we are the antidote to those natural tendencies of the world.

That we live in a corrupt world is not news to any of us. In fact, I'm afraid that we as Christians have become much more adept at pointing out the corruption than we are at being salt in the midst of it. There are all kinds of corruption around us. Prominently, there is the moral decay of a world that is spiraling downward as it chooses to live apart from God and his ways. We've all seen evidences of that spread broadly through our culture and certainly manifested by our own personal sinful choices. What Jesus is saying is that within a society bent toward moral decay, God has placed something that will be a preservative or will arrest that corruption, and that is his people.

The other assumption is that the world is characterized by darkness. Darkness, by and large, is a metaphor for confusion or lack of understanding. The way is not plain. And because in the midst of this darkness people are thrashing and crashing about, there needs to be something that will light the way.

Yesterday afternoon on TV, I came upon the movie *Wait Until Dark*. It's an old classic starring Audrey Hepburn, who plays a blind woman who has unknowingly been given a doll that has drugs stuffed into it. Thugs are after her, but she doesn't know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. At the climax of the movie, she knows that these thugs are going to come into her apartment after the doll. In order to level the playing field when they come after her, she goes through and breaks every light bulb so that her apartment is in total darkness. As they break into the apartment, the screen goes totally black, and you only hear people thrashing and falling and screaming and so on. Without light, there is confusion, terror, people bumping into things trying to figure out which way to go and where the enemy is. What a picture that is of our world. And what God calls us to as his people is to speak into that, to be those who will light the way in this darkness.

The way Jesus states these two metaphors implies that this is what it means to be the people of God. There are two profound things about the way Jesus speaks these words. First, the word "you" is plural, not singular. We Americans and westerners tend to read Scripture so much through an individualistic grid. "*I am the salt of the earth and the light of the world.*" Now, there is certainly a profoundly beautiful personal challenge in this passage. But what God is doing when he brings me to faith is not merely saving me as another individual to populate heaven. No, he saves me as part of a people he is calling out for

himself. So when the challenge comes to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, it is God's statement that he is calling out for himself a people of his own choosing who will act as his agents in this world as both salt and light. We must understand this at the corporate level as well as the individual level.

Second, the way he expresses this is emphatic and unequivocal. He doesn't say, "You will become salt and light," or, "You might be salt and light," or even, "Be salt and light." He says, "You *are* salt and light." This is the very essence of who we are in Christ. In fact, as he comes to say in these verses, if the salt loses its saltiness, what use is it? And if the light is put under the basket, what use is it? When we fail to function this way, we cease to be that for which God called us into existence, his people in this world.

So how are we to be the people of God in this way? If we think back carefully over the history of the church, we will see example after example of people living out this calling as agents within the corporate body of Christ, leading the people of God to be salt and light.

### **What salt and light look like**

William Wilberforce spent year after year serving in Parliament in England as his life's calling under the influence of some very significant people, including John Newton, who was saved by Christ from being a slave trader (and went on to write the hymn *Amazing Grace*). Wilberforce saw his life's calling as that of being a witness and calling people around him to be the people of God in England. Finally his efforts came to fruition when he was able to lead Parliament to ban the slave trade.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, locked in a Soviet gulag year after year, rather than despairing and giving up, shared his hope and peace with the other prisoners in the midst of the most arduous and difficult circumstances. He too was acting as salt and light.

Closer to home, I've had the privilege of seeing God work among people here at PBC. I recently met some of the people who, in the face of the challenge to the life of the unborn, were led by God some years ago to found the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Mountain View, which to this day is a foundation stone in our community, light and salt, a witness to those who would take up the challenge to avoid abortion and seek a different way.

This summer I also met Pam Nordstrom, who has buried her life in East Palo Alto helping disadvantaged young women. Our summer missionaries have chosen to give up part of their summer freedom and their opportunity to make money to go off and serve God around the world. People serve with Habitat for Humanity and Community Pallet, an organization that calls people to service in our community. Lambert Dolphin, Ted Wise, Elaine Stedman, and many others answer weekly the myriad of prayer requests and difficult questions that come in on the PBC web site. This morning I met Suzanne Jacobson, one of our full-time missionaries, who, with her husband and children, have taken the gospel to the people of the Philippines. Greg and Hillary Lundstedt grew up in this church and are now going out to serve in a pastoral role. There are all kinds of instances of people following God's calling to be salt and light, at great personal sacrifice.

These are examples of people God has reached down and touched to minister in special circumstances. We might ask, "But what does it look like for us to be the people of God, salt and light, day by day?"

I'd like to start by saying what it's not. If we are truly to be the people of God and to act as salt and light, we have to resist some of the trends that are impoverishing our churches now.

### **The problem of self-absorption**

One of the most dangerous trends is the natural tendency to be self-absorbed, which we all have, along with the American culture of consumerism, which results in a church culture that is consumer-based. "I don't like what this church has to offer,

so I'll go to that church. I like their worship better." I know people who say, "I like the worship in this church, but I like the teaching in that church, and there is something for my kids over in the other church," and they're scattered all over. What's behind all that is the desire to go somewhere that meets our needs, and living in America, we have a great buffet, so to speak, of choices. This consumer mentality leads churches to conclude that the only way they can reach out is to become terribly niche-oriented. Ultimately it leads to what I call the Balkanization of our church life--we've got niches for youth, college, old folks, niches everywhere. And somehow we've lost any sense of being called out as the people of God, young and old, of different races and socio-economic strata, coming together at the foot of the cross to nurture and care for one another and then to speak profoundly into the surrounding community through that experience of God together.

Now, I understand completely, as a college pastor, that the unique needs of college students, for example, require some special attention. But we have come so far down that road in our modern churches in the U.S. that the concept of a united body of Christ is being terribly lost.

Over the last few months the pastoral staff and elders at PBC have prayed and agonized and thought about those very challenges and where God is taking this church in the future. How do we minister broadly to the different needs of a congregation like this while preserving the beauty of the body united in Christ? We live in an age that is so selfishly motivated that it's very easy to degenerate into the mentality of striving only to meet particular needs.

Where I have to begin is this: If I want to participate in truly functioning as salt and light, as God's called-out people, I have to be willing to lay aside my preferences, my prejudices, my own selfish approach to church life, and ask God, "Where do I fit into this people that you're calling out? What are my gifts? How do I get in and learn from those different from myself? Out of that whole beautiful experience, how do I see the body of Christ built up?" So the very first thing we have to do is jump that hurdle of squabbling about music and so on, and somewhere along the broad range from dead traditionalism to emotional over-indulgence, seek something different.

I would suggest that we must take up four distinct characteristics to be the people of God, salt and light in this world.

### **The people of God worship**

First of all, we must be a truly worshipping community. This world is crying out for a place, again, between those extremes of dead traditionalism and emotional over-indulgence, where people from all different backgrounds unite their hearts in praise and worship of the living God, learn how to sing in one voice, regardless of the music style of the day, learn from each other's rich experiences of Christ, and truly focus on the living God, selflessly joining together to lift up his name.

### **The people of God are nurtured**

Second, we must become a nurturing community. There are two important aspects of nurture. One is that we must be a community of faith that truly nurtures people in the word of God. PBC is a church that strives greatly to get every person in this body deeply digging into the word of God for themselves, able to study it and know it. In fact, when I came to this church two years ago, I was absolutely astounded at how many people in this body seriously undertook the study of the word of God for themselves. Corporately and individually, part of our strength is making the word of God that central feeding of our souls so that we grow strong in it and are prepared for life and ministry.

The other aspect of nurture is equally important. The nature of the community itself must provide an environment in which we are personally encouraged and challenged and upheld so that we can be salt and light wherever God places us day by day during our week. So whether I'm seeking to be salt and light in the board room of a Silicon Valley conglomerate, or I'm working in a blue-collar job, or I'm a mom changing diapers and taking my children to play groups in the community, or I'm a student in high school or college, I know that when I walk into that arena to be salt and light there, empowered by God's

Holy Spirit, I am surrounded by the love of the community of faith, knowing that people are praying for me and that when I falter and struggle, there are people to whom I can turn who will love me and challenge me and support me. There are a number of metaphors for this in the Bible-members of the family, parts of the body, stones in the building-that show that I am part of something greater than myself. That relationship ties me to the life and vitality of the people of God and supports me and nurtures me as I seek to be salt and light.

A number of people in the family here sent me notes of encouragement after I preached last week. Some said things like, "We're praying for you," and one even said, "We're cheering you on!" It was so important to me to know that there were people in the body who cared enough to pray and support me in that way. But I'm a bit like a circus act because I'm only in town for a short time, which draws attention to my being on the platform. I got to thinking about that. How many of us pray week to week for Doug Goins and Steve Zeisler? I've been where they are, responsible week in and week out to be the main one teaching a body and growing it up, and it's a lot to have on your shoulders. How much more important it is for them to know that we're praying and investing ourselves in them. Think of the person next to you who is going to walk out into their unique circumstances: family, job, neighbors, friendship networks. They need to know that they are surrounded by loving, caring people who are praying for them and encouraging them. The twin empowerment of the Holy Spirit within us and the body of Christ around us sets us free to be the people of God in our world.

### **The people of God care for others**

The third characteristic we must take up to be the people of God is to care for those in the surrounding community. When our focus is on worshipping God and when we are nurtured in the body, then we can truly be free to care for the needs of others. In my last message (Discovery Paper #8165) we studied Luke 10, the parable of the good Samaritan, which Jesus tells in the context of a dialogue between him and a lawyer who is seeking to justify himself by saying he has kept all the Law. Jesus challenges him to go beyond his normal conceptions and realize that the one who truly loves God and neighbor is the one who cares enough to sacrificially give to meet the needs around them. We all know that we live in a hurting world. Empowered by worship and nurture and committed to being salt and light, we can be set free to look around us, get out of our comfort zones, and say, "I will stretch myself to meet the need. I will break out of my box of safety and comfort. I will stop the busy pace of my life that keeps me from even seeing the need next to me. I will become part of a caring community that embraces the needs around it as its God-given ministry."

### **The people of God witness**

The fourth characteristic we must have to be the people of God is to be a witnessing community. Being a witness for Christ is a complicated thing. When I was a new believer in Christ, I learned that witnessing was sitting down with someone and reading through a booklet that told about the gospel of Christ. Now, that can be a very important aspect of what we do. But I began to learn as I grew that there is more to witnessing than that. Witnessing is about living and proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ in whatever environment and with whatever means necessary. But as we are empowered through our worship and through our nurture, and as we are caring for the needs of our community, what happens is through naturally living out our faith we are able to express clearly to those who need to hear it the gospel message of the wonderful, transforming grace of God. Out there in this world of darkness and corruption where people are thrashing about looking for answers and for healing, looking for something that they have not yet found, we, the church, are uniquely positioned in all of creation to stand up and proclaim the truth that we have found.

But this doesn't happen without great cost. It means that we have to stop retreating from engagement with our world.

When I was living in Vienna, I had a literal and what became a metaphorical retreat from the world. After a long, busy week and a long, intense Sunday, I'd be exhausted. On one of the sports channels on TV they actually carried PGA golf tournaments. They were my end-of-the-week zone-out refresher. They were on from 10:00 P.M. to midnight or 1:00 A.M.

because of the time difference. I would park my recliner in front of the TV, tip myself back, and zone out watching golf. And once I had sat down, the thing I hated most was for the phone to ring. It would be somebody with some need or some question. But I would think, "How dare they call when I'm in my recliner?"

That recliner has become a mental anchor in my life that makes me realize how easy it is for me to say, "I've just got to somehow box myself in from the need of the world." Every one of us has some sort of recliner in our life. Now, obviously we need pauses and breaks. What I'm talking about here is a state of mind and heart that says, "Somehow I just deserve to be free not to have to care about all this pain and suffering around me." But I would suggest to you that we don't have that luxury.

We can't live up to this unless we are that worshipping, nurturing community that we talked about. But we are the people of God, and God compels us to get out of our recliners and into the world to care, nurture, reach out, and touch in profound and deep ways that we alone, as believers in the one true God and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, can bring to this world.

A pastor, Adrian Rodgers, I used to listen to all the time and for whom I still have great respect used to have this saying: "We live what we truly believe. The rest is just religious talk." We're all very adept at religious talk. What does our life show about what we really believe? Do we really believe that we are God's salt and light, that we are called out to be his people who will make a difference in our world?

So I come full circle and ask you this question: Why are you here?

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