

# WHAT WILL OTHER PEOPLE THINK?

*SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY*

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I was at Borders not long ago, browsing through the books, and a title caught my eye: *The Cheating Culture* by David Callahan (1). I picked it up and flipped through it. Callahan had been doing sociological studies on American society, and one of the things he had noticed was a steady rise in basic dishonesty, particularly in the last twenty years. For instance, more students admit to cheating on tests and assignments. More people admit that they cheat on their income taxes. Even CPAs tell people to lie about their deductions and so on. “You’re never going to be audited anyway.” And preachers are stealing sermons off the internet! There’s an example of how Christians behave just like non-Christians, even though we say we believe different things, and we may in certain circumstances act differently. It struck me once again how little impact we have on the culture around us in terms of the way we live out our faith. I don’t know if I buy into all of Callahan’s conclusions, but this book is a wake-up call to ask ourselves some hard questions.

Jesus was not one to shy away from asking hard questions that penetrated the lives of the people who claimed to follow God. He came at a time when the nation of Israel had become very ingrown and self-preserving. The Jews remembered a glorious past and longed for a new and glorious future, but in the present they had morphed into a very closed, self-defined, self-praising community. In reality Israel was a small community way out on the edge of the Roman Empire, insignificant in the larger scope of world history. The Jews longed for a sense of the transcendent place in history that they had once had, and they were waiting for their messiah-king to come and throw off the Roman Empire and reestablish them as a great and mighty nation. Some were willing to go to extreme political measures, even insurrection, in order to achieve these goals. Others were content to find security in the Law, piling up more and more regulations in order to define themselves as the righteous people of God.

Jesus stepped into that culture and told them, “You have it all wrong.” He reinterpreted what it meant to be a follower of God and reminded them of their original calling. In the teaching we are looking at in this series, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explains what it means to be a part of God’s kingdom, the true community of faith.

In the passage we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 4902), Matthew 5:3-10, which we call the Beatitudes, Jesus makes a series of eight statements of blessing that are really a description of the kind of person who has the blessing of God, who finds peace and contentment in God. His beautiful description challenges Israel to be the true people of God in their world.

Then in verses 11-12 Jesus turns to his listeners and begins to address them personally.

## **Rejoice when you’re persecuted**

**Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

By personalizing this he takes this description of kingdom people out of the realm of the theoretical and

puts it right where you and I live. “Blessed are *you* when this happens to you. I’m calling *you* to be the people of God.”

In these verses he gives his followers a specific challenge. First, they should expect to be persecuted, if they are going to live this way. In our own culture, as we all know, you can talk about religion and spirituality all you want, but if you bring up Jesus, the heat rises quickly. His message about our sinfulness, our need of God’s grace, and the kind of life we are to live when we follow him is specific and uncompromising. So persecution and opposition are directed at us very personally.

Then Jesus goes on to say something that is so counterintuitive that we don’t know what to do with it: not only are we to expect persecution, we are to be happy about it! “Rejoice and be glad....” Don’t simply endure under it; rejoice in it! Now, why should we rejoice and be glad? First, he says, we should rejoice because we are in good company here. The prophets of God have always been treated this way. It’s interesting that the Old-Testament prophets received almost all of their persecution not from outsiders but from within Israel, their own people. If you get into any community of faith and call it to repentance and righteousness, you will watch the feathers fly. Even within the community of faith, when you stand up for following Christ with your whole heart, people will react to that. You are getting in their face about things that are deeply personal in the way that they live, and you are going to get persecuted. But rejoice, because you are in good company.

But we are also to be glad because there is a great reward for us in heaven. There is coming a day when God will set everything right, the day of his vindication, when Christ will be revealed as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, when justice will be finally and completely meted out. Those who are willing to sacrifice all for Christ will be vindicated when who he is and what he has done for us are fully revealed. So we can rejoice looking forward to future glory and looking back to the fact that this has always been true for God’s people. We can stand in that stream of the faithful and willingly sacrifice all for God’s glory.

You will notice, however, that while Jesus says to expect this persecution, he doesn’t say to go looking for it. I have known Christians who felt it was their calling to be as obnoxious as they could possibly be, and then when people got angry about it, they could say, “I’m being persecuted for Christ!” They wore that like a badge. That is not what Jesus is talking about here. He says the focus is on living in a way that honors him.

In 5:13-16, Jesus goes on to describe in two beautiful word pictures the calling that we have as the people of God. As we live out our faith, this is the kind of effect we should have on our society.

## **Salt and light**

**You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, 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 does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, 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.**

The respective functions of salt and light imply something about the larger culture. Salt was primarily used as a preservative, and that implies that there is corruption in the world. Society is on a path toward

increasing degradation and destruction; an ever-growing sense of evil permeates the world at large because of people's choices to live for themselves apart from God. The metaphor of light implies darkness, which in Scripture is a metaphor for two things. It is a metaphor for this evil world, which reinforces the implication of corruption. But it is also a metaphor for lostness, confusion, and wrong thinking in the world. The world is searching for answers to the meaning of life, some way out of the pain of life, some sense of the validity of life. But the answers out there are elusive and confusing. They lead down paths that are destructive. So people are bumping around in the darkness. Something is needed to call people to the right way. Using these metaphors, Jesus is calling us as the people of God to supply that. In this kind of world, the people of God play a pivotal role.

Note that Jesus does not say, "Become salt," or "Become light." And he doesn't say, "Use salt," or "Use light," as if it were a tool of ministry. He says, "You *are* salt. You *are* light." It is the very definition of who we are as people of faith. It is part of the DNA, if you will, of the followers of Christ, both individuals and the community. *The question is whether you are functioning as what you really are.*

Let's look at each of these two metaphors. As I said, salt was primarily (although not exclusively) used as a preservative because, obviously, there was no refrigeration. Food, particularly meat, would spoil quickly, so salt was rubbed into it to retard corruption and preserve it as long as possible.

This corrupt world is moving farther and farther away from God, living out views and practices and strategies to meet all kinds of needs that are contrary to the ways of God and that lead ultimately to deeper cycles of destruction. Who is going to stop this process? Where will people turn? What will be planted in the midst of this corruption that will slow it down a bit, act as a preservative, call the world to a different way of living characterized by hope and peace and blessing and healing? Jesus says, "That's you--my people, recipients of my grace who are being transformed by my Spirit. You will live in the midst of that corruption and slow down the process of destruction, by the presence of righteousness and the glory of God's grace in the community of faith." So when the world is looking around for some way out of the cycle of destruction, it will notice the community of faith, living under God's grace and forgiveness and through the power of the Holy Spirit, standing as a witness to God's grace and mercy in our world, working against the process of destruction in our society, offering hope for a different way.

Let's consider the metaphor of light. Jesus explains this one a little more. The metaphor of light appears all through Scripture. In fact, in many of the prophetic writings there are references to the light that will go out into the world. In the latter part of Isaiah, particularly in the sections that are called the Songs of the Servant, or the Suffering Servant, there are references to his being light. Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 are a couple of examples. All through those beautiful poems about God's Messiah, which are fulfilled in Jesus, there are references to his being the Light that will come into the world, and the nations' streaming toward this Light looking for healing and restoration to God. This Light will be a beacon in the darkness.

Jesus says that we as his followers, the body of Christ, inherit that function of light in the world. Ephesians 5:8-9 describes the followers of God that way: "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of Light...." Philippians 2:14-15 says, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world...." Christ who is *the* Light of the world continues to radiate his light into the world through his people.

That means we have to be a visible community. Notice the two practical illustrations of this principle that Jesus gives. First he says, "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden...." We have all driven through the night at times and seen on a hillside a city or a cluster of houses. The lights are easy to spot in the sea of

darkness. Then he goes on to say, “Take a lamp. You don’t put a bushel basket over it. You set it on a lamp stand out in the middle of the room.” Can you imagine how weird it would look if we all taped over all the lights in our homes with duct tape? That isn’t what you do with light. Jesus says, “No, you put it in a prominent place where it can do its job, which is to drive out the darkness.” That means that we have to be living our lives in such a way that people can see them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, talks about our being a visible community and the opposite, being an invisible community:

“Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him.” (2)

Jesus calls us into a kind of discipleship that is lived out before the world. Yes, it will cost us. There will be persecution. But lest we think this cost is too great, we need to spend a lot of time thinking about the cost of non-discipleship. It costs a lot to follow Jesus, but it costs so much more to not follow Jesus. At the end of the line, those promises are so great and so wonderful that they outweigh anything that we could lose in this world.

How do we hide ourselves? There are all kinds of things that we could say about that, but let me suggest two broad categories. One is separating our spiritual lives from the rest of our lives. Our lives get fragmented, compartmentalized into work or school, family, recreation, and so on. When I go to work, that’s not spiritual time, it’s work time. When I hang out with my family, none of them are Christians, so that’s not spiritual time. We end up with a compartment for church and God, and perhaps we feel pretty good about ourselves because, with all these other things going on, we do manage to squeeze Jesus in. But when our thinking runs along those lines, when our spiritual life is separated out from the rest of our life, we are well on our way to putting a bushel basket over the lamp. Instead, *our walk with Christ has to inform everything we do in life*. It has to be part of how we conduct our business, how we conduct our family affairs, how we make choices about the use of our time in general. Our walk with Christ has to permeate everything.

The other category is isolating our community of faith from the world. It is easy for us to start defining ourselves by criteria from within the community. We evaluate our progress as a community of faith in terms of how many people are showing up on Sunday morning, how many people are involved in Bible study, and so on. It’s not that any of that is bad. I want more and more people to come here on Sunday, and to be studying the Scriptures. But it’s so easy to get focused on the internal apparatus of our church life and isolate ourselves. The church becomes a place where we can relax on Sunday mornings, spend time among people we really like who think like we do, who are unthreatening in terms of our faith. We’re comfortable here, but out there is that big, bad, evil world.

Particularly in the States, we have developed a whole Christian subculture that we can hide in. Studies have concluded that for the average American who comes to Christ, within three years he or she will no longer have any significant relationships or friendships with a non-Christian person. They get absorbed into the Christian subculture. Now, there are some good things about that. New believers need to come into the family to be nurtured, discipled, and cared for. But what happens over time is that we become more and more ingrown, and then most of us truly have a hard time being able to speak of any significant relationships we have with people outside the community of faith. And if you are like me, you look out at the needs of the world and say, “What can I do? They are too great.” So you seek the comfort of the community. But Jesus’ understanding of the community is as a place where we grow strong together in order to be salt and light to the world.

How, then, can we function as salt and light?

## Getting into the game

First, I think that as the people of God we have to be a vital, loving community. The world is hungry for a sense of acceptance. Where can they find love, forgiveness, the answers to life? They look around for anyplace and anybody; they will go after the newest cool idea, however crazy it might be. But what if they saw a community of people who were absolutely committed to love, forgive, nurture, challenge, and care for one another at the deepest level of their lives? What if they found that there were people who were setting aside their own agendas and living for the good of the community of faith? What a powerful witness that would be to our world!

How many people in your sphere of influence--your job or your school--know that you are part of a community of faith that defines much of your life? Do they know that you are part of a fellowship of which the chief characteristics are loyalty to Christ and love for one another? I would guess that most people have no clue. They may know we go to a church, but are they able to observe or even hear us talking about the incredible gift of the vital community of love, where no one is left behind, where gifts are being developed, where care is being given--all the things that we read in the New Testament church life is supposed to be?

Second, we can be salt and light by directly engaging our world, meeting needs, proclaiming the gospel, getting our hands dirty out there where people are hurting and needing help. God is doing some amazing things through this body of people. This is a wonderful, loving community that is actively involved in so many ways. But our desire is for God to take us ever deeper in that. Let me share some of the things we are involved in. Locally, people from this body are regularly involved in Bayshore Christian Ministries, New Creation Home, Bread of Life, Community Pregnancy Centers, Green Pastures, Help One Child (an adoption/foster care ministry), Hillcrest Chaplaincy Ministries (which works with delinquent youth who are in crisis), Urban Ministries, and Young Life. People in our body are making a difference in all kinds of ways.

Recently, in response to our Joy to the World program, the Bread of Life ministry wrote this letter of thanks to Carol Lind, our contact person with them:

“I never cease to be amazed by God’s faithfulness and Peninsula Bible Church’s generosity toward our ministry. Please accept my PROFOUND gratitude of how you all have again assisted Bread of Life in serving the disenfranchised and the poor. You have no idea how much of a blessing you are to this ministry. I am convinced that God’s favor will shine more brightly on Peninsula Bible Church because of the joy that this wonderful congregation sends out to the world. I love you for your sweet spirit, your committed life, your ready smile, and your encouragement to all those around you. May God continue to bless you and Peninsula Bible Church.”

We are involved in incredibly important ministries around us. We are trying to be light out there. But the challenge is to do more.

Globally, we are supporting almost twenty different missionaries and ministries around the country and around the world. Some are doing translation of the Scriptures, some church-planting, some working with students, some working in evangelism. One of our missionaries is involved with an organization called Medical Ambassadors, which develops health care programs for poor people in less privileged countries. They go into communities and train people in a community-based healthcare system that reaches out in mercy and loving compassion to help with the healthcare needs in primitive and remote communities. Out of that they are able to show the love of Christ and share the gospel of Christ. They

have amazing stories of how God has transformed villages and people's lives through this ministry. We have had teams go to Mexican prisons. Medical teams have gone into Central America. Last year we sent a team to Russia to work with street kids. We pray these opportunities to go out with one another and take the light of Christ all over the world will continue to abound.

I love to sit and analyze these things. I love to think about how we can do ministry better and how we can be a better community of faith and a better light in the world. But I've figured out that I am a whole lot better at talking about it than doing it. At some point you've just got to go play the game! If we wait until we figure out how to do it perfectly, we will never do it. "If I just have another year of Bible study, maybe I'll know enough to be able to reach out to my neighbor." "I don't know how to talk to a poor person or a homeless person yet, so I can't do that." But we never will unless we come to the point where we say, "Okay, God, you said I am light and salt; I am just going to go out and trust you for the strength and wisdom to figure it out." That doesn't mean it isn't right to plan. It doesn't mean when we make mistakes that we don't try to figure out how to do it right, and work together to do it better. But we can spend the rest of our lives analyzing how to get it right and never do one thing.

So what I want to ask you to do is simply pray. I am going to suggest some things for you to pray about for your own life and for your community.

- Start by asking yourself, "How committed am I really to the lordship of Christ in my life? Do I really desire to honor him in everything I do?" Think about how you might have compartmentalized your life, and ask God to help you figure out how your love for Jesus can inform every area of your life and all of your priorities.
- Now visualize all the people that your life intersects with on a regular basis: your family, the people at your workplace or school, the people in your neighborhood, the people at the local grocery store. Ask yourself, "How am I being salt and light to them?" Ask God to teach you.
- Finally, visualize whom you might partner with to be salt and light in your world. If you are not sure who they are, then pray to God to give you partners, people you can work with and stand alongside to be light and salt in your community.

It is very fashionable in our culture to say that religion is a private matter, when in reality that is not what the New Testament teaches. While our faith in Christ is very personal, it is never private. God calls us to be part of a community of faith and calls that community to make a difference in our world.

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## Notes

- 1) David Callahan, *The Cheating Culture*, © 2004, Harcourt Books, New York.
- 2) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Revised Edition, © 1937, 1949, 1959, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York. P. 132.

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