

# The Christian's Influence

Matthew 5:13-16

An ancient Greek myth tells of a goddess who came to earth unseen, but whose presence was always known by the blessings she left behind in her pathway. Trees that had been burned by forest fires sprouted new leaves, and violets sprang up in her footprints. As she passed a stagnant pool, its water became fresh. Parched fields turned green as she walked through them. Hills and valleys blossomed with new life and beauty wherever she went.

In contrast to this, another Greek story tells of a princess sent as a present to a king. She was as beautiful as Aphrodite and her breath was as sweet as perfume, but she carried with her the contagion of death and decay. From infancy she had fed on nothing but poison, and she became so permeated with it that she poisoned the very atmosphere around her. Her breath would kill a swarm of insects; she would pick a flower and it would wither. A bird flying too close would fall dead at her feet!

Here are two mythological creatures; one a goddess, and one a princess; one unseen, the other beautiful in appearance; but both of them having their own unmistakable influence resulting in great blessing or in terrible devastation!

In Matthew 5:13-16, the Lord summarizes the function of believers in the world. Reduced to one word, that function is influence! Whoever lives according to the Beatitudes is going to function in the world as salt and light, both preserving and enlightening the fabric of human society.

Jesus knew, of course, that human character consciously or unconsciously affects other people for better or for worse. John Donne said, "No man is an island."

Elihu Burrit added: "No human being can come into this world without increasing or diminishing the sum total of human happiness. Everywhere one's presence or absence will be felt. We will all have companions who will be better or worse because of us."

This being the case, as responsible Christians we need to ask ourselves, "When people look at us what do they see? Do they see true Christian character in us, the kind of character that is attractive because of its Christ-likeness?" The answer to this crucial question determines whether we are influencing the world towards Christ or being influenced by the world away from Him.

A dignified old clergyman owned a parrot of which he was exceedingly fond, but the bird had picked up an appalling vocabulary of cuss words from a previous owner and, after a series of particularly embarrassing episodes, the clergyman decided that he would have to have the parrot put to sleep.

However, a lady in his congregation suggested a last-ditch remedy. "I have a female parrot. She is an absolute saint. She sits quietly on her perch and prays constantly. Why don't you bring your parrot over and see if my own bird's good influence doesn't reform him?" The pastor agreed that it was worth a try, and the next night he arrived with his parrot.

The bird took one look at the female parrot and chirped, "Hi toots, how about a big kiss?" Without hesitation, and much to the consternation of her owner, the female parrot responded gleefully, "My prayers have been answered!"

One of the test questions we should be asking ourselves regularly is, "Who is influencing who?" The first sixteen verses of this towering Sermon on the Mount, in which our Lord delivers his kingdom manifesto, tell us that the key to godly influence is godly character.

In the first twelve verses, Jesus talks about what our character is meant to be, and then in verses 13-16, he summarizes the resulting influence that our lives should have.

We are first of all instructed that Christians are fundamentally different from non-believers in terms of their character. God is calling out from the world a people for Himself, and these people are to be different. They are to be holy. This is a major theme of the Bible. "Be holy," says the Lord, "because I am holy!" Moreover, "Without holiness no one shall see God."

Here, in the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (those who realize they need God), but the world says blessed are the proud in spirit (self-made achievers).

God says, "Blessed are those who mourn" (those who are sorrowful because they are aware of their own spiritual poverty and they grieve over sin), but the world says blessed are the mirthful who laugh at sin.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek" (those who are self-controlled and submissive to God), but the world says blessed are the macho.

God says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness," but the world says blessed are those who hunger and thirst after their rights.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful," but the world says blessed are the manipulators.

Our Lord says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God," but the world says blessed are the perverse in heart, for there is no god.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake," but the world says blessed are those who are promoted for political correctness' sake.

What opposition we see between the values of the Kingdom of God and those of the world. Which will prevail? The answer is that God's values will, and that God is to be thanked for ensuring that there are enough Holy Spirit-filled believers that evil is presently restrained and destined for judgment.

What about us? We often pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!" Do our neighbors see that we have different expectations, values, and priorities than those of the world? Is it apparent to them that we are on a life-long mission to represent Jesus, and that we are a people of purpose who are working to bring in the Kingdom of God?

The Lord teaches that we must permeate non-Christian society with our holiness. While we are to be distinct, we are not to be socially segregated. Our light is to shine into the darkness. Our saltiness is to soak into the decaying flesh of the world. If in this world we are destined to rub shoulders with our fellow human beings, then upon their lives must our holiness rub off!

Here is our Christian mandate to really impact the world. The Beatitudes are not to be lived in isolation or only among fellow believers, but everywhere we go. God's only witnesses are His children, and the world has no other way of knowing Him except through the testimony of what we are.

The world needs our influence. It needs salt because it is corrupt, and it needs light because it is dark. Man's knowledge is increasing by quantum leaps in the scientific, medical, psychological, and technological realms. But his increases do not retard his corruption.

Our discoveries and accomplishments seem only to have provided ways for us to promote and express our depravity faster and more destructively.

We go on from war to war, from crime to crime, from immorality to greater immorality, from perversion to greater perversion. The spiral is downward. Despair and pessimism reign in our day, because the honest person knows that man has not been able to retard his descent. Our world desperately needs authentic Christian influence before it is too late.

Some years ago a magazine carried a series of pictures that graphically depicted a tragic story. The first picture was of a vast wheat field in western Kansas. The second showed a distressed mother sitting in a farmhouse in the centre of the wheat-field. The accompanying story explained that her four-year-old son had wandered off into the wheat-field when no one was watching. The mother and father had looked all day, but the little fellow was too short to see over the wheat stalks or to be seen. The third picture showed dozens of friends and neighbours who had heard of the boy's plight and who had joined hands the next morning to make a long human chain as they walked through the field searching. The final picture was of the heartbroken father holding his lifeless son. He had been found too late and had died of exposure. The caption underneath read, "O God, if only we had joined hands sooner."

The world is full of lost souls who cannot see their way above the distractions and barriers of the world and cannot find their way to our heavenly Father's house. Jesus said, "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." We must join hands in a mission to save the lost before harvest-time is over. How tragic if we were to one day wake up to the awful realization, "O God, if only we had joined hands sooner!"

The Lord is calling us to be missionaries to our culture. He's calling us to join hands - each of us like a particle of light or a grain of salt - and to infiltrate this small corner of the world, right where we are, so as to influence it for Christ.

The great missionary, Jim Elliott, blazes the trail for us all. I can think of no better prayer for myself, or for any member of this church, than the one Elliott breathed out in his passionate desire to influence the world for Christ. He said:

***"Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me."***

It must begin right here in this congregation. We must ensure that as we face each other we experience an encounter with the Master. We cannot join hands in unholiness! So we must first consider how we are influencing each other. Let each of us ask the question, "When my brother or sister in this place faces me do they encounter Christ in me?"

We can follow-up this question with ones like it: “Am I salt and light? Am I what the Master said I am to be?” If the answer to any of these questions is “No!” then we know what we must do. We must ask the Lord to be at the very centre of our life, on the throne of our life. From there he must radiate his character until it permeates our whole being, from the centre to the very margins of our life and beyond. Let us pray!