

I Love My Church #3
Shining & Seasoning or Blinding & Gagging?
Matthew 5:13-16
10/22/17

- A couple of weeks ago, I talked about restaurants that I love. Today, I want you to think of a restaurant you were so excited about but it turned out to be such a dud. Either the food or the atmosphere were just wrong. Can you think of an experience like that?
 - I can. When I was youth pastor in Ohio, we took a group of students to Denver, Colorado where the International Youth Convention was that year. We were all told about this super cool restaurant that had a cliff-diving show while you were eating. It's called Casa Bonita and it just so happened to be a Mexican restaurant.
 - So, we thought it would be a neat experience for the teens. We drove a little outside of Denver to get to the place early because we heard that it filled up quickly.
 - The place was decked out. There were things to see at every turn. It was hard not to be distracted as they brought us to our tables. In the center of the restaurant is this huge cliff with a waterfall with a couple of caves that you can walk through behind the waterfall.
 - Every hour or so, these guys would come out to do a cliff-diving show. There was a mariachi band that would go around and play when the cliff-diving wasn't happening. And, there was a puppet show that went on as well during different times.
 - It was an all-you-can-eat kind of place if you got the traditional Mexican fiesta meal. But, for as cool as the atmosphere was, the food was OK. It wasn't something I would write home about. The best thing they had was the sopapillas they had for dessert. So, really, you are going for the show and atmosphere, not for the food.

- On the opposite side...last year, when Wil and I went to Pennsylvania for our anniversary, as we were driving, it was lunchtime, and we decided to see if there were any good Mexican restaurants around. We found one in Newburgh, NY that had great reviews. So, we decided to check it out.
 - Anyway, we put the address into the GPS and were looking forward to finding this place that wasn't too far off the highway. Until we pulled up to the place. It was located in an obvious not great part of town. Nothing about the outside or the inside would draw you in. In fact, I looked at Wil and said, "Well, what do you think?" He said, "What were the reviews again?" I said, "All the reviews said the food is great." So, we decided to give it a try.
 - When I tell you the food was great, I'm not kidding. It was off the hook! It was such good, authentic Mexican food that you almost had to speak Spanish to be able to order
 - So, in that place, the food was fantastic, but the atmosphere definitely left

something to be desired.

- Now, if you watch any shows about restaurants, you know that a great dining experience really comes down to those two things: food and atmosphere. It's all about what you see and what you taste.
 - o For the math people in the house, here's the equation: Food + Atmosphere = Experience. If you hear about a new restaurant coming to town, aren't those the two things you ask about? How's the food? What's the feel/look?

- So, let's apply this to our *I Love My Church* series. Jesus has given us new lives without fences, lives that are part of the new community He is creating. This life in this community, in His kingdom, is life as it was meant to be, giving us a new identity and a new set of values and ethics to live by.
 - o We concluded the first week and last week that our reputation as people of this new community should be one of love. Indeed, people will know we are Christ followers by how we love. God wants all people to know this life of salvation, forgiveness, peace, healing, purpose, and hope. People are attracted to God when they see his love lived out in the way we love.
 - o Last week, we looked how God wants us to love by breaking down fences between us so we can get into each other's backyard of their life so we can be real with each other.
 - o Church, I am convinced that if we love each other like Jesus loves us and if we can trust each other enough to really go deep and be real with each other, it will make an impact on those around us. Because here's the fact, people deal with fake love and fake relationships all of the time, everywhere. When they see something real, they are attracted to it.

- So, then, here's the question we have to consider in our series: when we gather together as the church, how do people experience the Kingdom of God among us? Because the kingdom of God isn't just something we experience in heaven. It's something we can experience in part here and now. That's what Jesus said and he uses the church to be that experience.
 - o What I just said is a big deal for us, church. God entrusts us to create the kingdom experience.
 - o So, how do we create a kingdom experience for people so that they want to know Jesus? Well, let's read **Matthew 5:13-16**.

- In this passage, we are seeing that much like restaurants create a dining experience through atmosphere and great food, we are to create an attractive kingdom of heaven experience for people so they want to be a part of God's kingdom.
 - o We do this by how we taste and what atmosphere we have around us. Now, that sounds weird, right? But, stay with me.
 - o In *Matthew 5:13* Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." Salt brings taste. It brings flavor to bland food and it's a preserving agent.

- Someone gives you a plate of food really not up to snuff and what are the first words out of your mouth? “Can you please pass the salt?”
- So don't miss what Jesus is telling us in this metaphor. He is making it clear how necessary and important we are for the welfare of the world. Because we have experienced a transformation in our lives as we have come to the kingdom of heaven, now our transformed presence is necessary as God's means of influencing the world for good. Regardless of status or profession, the kingdom life that we possess is invaluable for the effect it will have in our daily circles of influence.
 - In other words, when people are around us, we leave a good taste in their mouth. You've heard that expression, right? It means that just being around something can leave a taste in your mouth. You will either pucker your mouth with a bad taste or smile with a good taste. Church, we want to be a good taste, right?
- Then, Jesus says in *Matthew 5:14* You are the light of the world.
 - Even the smallest of lights lifted up can chase away darkness.
 - When I was a teenager, my parents took my brothers and I to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky and we did the guided walking tour through the cave. At one point, we entered into this huge room of the cave. The guide told us all to stop at the bottom of this incline that you go up to get to the next section of the cave. He walked to the top of the incline. He talked about how dark it is in the cave and how it's so dark that just a little light from a little match makes a huge difference. He then turned out all the lights. Pitch black. You can't see anything, not your hand in front of your face – nothing. Then, he lights a match. That little light seemed to light up the whole place.
 - Light removes the darkness. In the same way that Jesus' life and message of salvation brought light to us (*Matthew 4:15-16*), we - His disciples – are a living demonstration of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven.
- So don't miss this metaphor either: Light removes the darkness. We not only carry the light of the gospel of the kingdom of God, but we *are* that light. Because of the work of the Spirit in our lives, our transformation has produced kingdom light in us, affecting every aspect of our being, turning us into positive influencers in this sin-darkened world.
 - We should bring an atmosphere of welcoming light to people that draws people to us.
- So, as salt and light, we bring the taste and atmosphere of Jesus' kingdom to our world. If Food + Atmosphere = Experience, then the experience of the kingdom comes from His followers!
 - It amazes me to think of what God entrusts His church with! Doesn't it amaze you what God entrusts us with? I mean, we're pretty prone to mess things majorly up. And, who knows that more than God?
 - Yet, even in the beginning, God trusted people to manage and take care of his creation. In *Genesis 1:26*, humankind are set to rule over the animals and care for

creation.

- And now, when Jesus is establishing the reality of His kingdom, Jesus entrusts us to set an example and look after the culture and experience of his kingdom. We are to bring the taste, we are to bring the light, we are to bring the Jesus community and Jesus kingdom experience to our city and culture so they can know God, find Him, repent, and find new life!
 - So, you don't like how our town is? Don't just wring your hands. Ask yourself if you are salting it. Discouraged that our culture is so dark? Don't just shake your head and complain about it. Ask yourself if you are lighting it up. If the culture is bland and dark, then we need to get to salting and lighting.
 - When we intentionally love one another, when we intentionally use our gifting and live out the love of God toward one another and to the world outside these walls, we are salting the bland and bringing light to the darkness. Saying "I love my church" isn't just about us, doesn't just impact us; it's about everyone outside these walls as well.

- How do we bring the *I Love My Church* experience to our culture? How do we bring the kingdom of God to our community? Let's looking more at the passage we just read and look at some of the verses around it, too. We can't separate Matthew 5:13-16 from Matthew 2:2-12 because it's all part of the same sermon. Too often, people take a couple of Scripture verses and quote them and sometimes take them out of context, meaning they make the verses mean something they weren't to mean. We can determine more about what the writer or speaker means by looking at the whole text.
 - Here, Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount. Like any good preacher, what he says all goes together and builds on each other. He starts his whole sermon with what we now call The Beatitudes. Let's read them in **Matthew 5:2-10**.

- The Beatitudes are the values of the Kingdom. These are the things that God values in us, that he wants us to reflect because when we reflect them, we reflect the kingdom
 - Then, Jesus goes on in **Matthew 5:11-12** to say that if we reflect kingdom values, we can expect that people aren't going to always like it, but there is a reward. Let's read those verses.

- Then, he talks about us being salt and light. In all that, Jesus is saying that People will experience Jesus' community and kingdom through us, the church, when we live kingdom values.
 - You can't be salt and light and make a difference in the culture or in our communities if we don't reflect the values of the kingdom like humility, mercy, purity, peace. And, people won't take the kingdom seriously if people who say they are kingdom of God people don't live out those values in such a way that nothing will deter them – not even persecution or others coming against them.
 - Jesus has brought the kingdom of God through regeneration and renewal by the Spirit. *He transforms us*. The Spirit produces in us a humble spirit, mourning for the

lost and broken, meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, and peace. These are the characteristics of Jesus' disciples that allow God to establish His kingdom in His way. This is the kingdom life God puts in us and that we then demonstrate to the world. The Beatitudes are a character profile of a person who says, "I Love My Church."

- So, seasoning and shining isn't only about the message we declare with our lips, or where we choose to sit for an hour and a half on Sunday, it's about how we go about our lives. Being salt and light is a lifestyle.
 - o Being salt and light is about the message we declare with our actions, reactions, and everything in between. *We can't separate message from lifestyle—this is about who we are and how we are.*
 - o The kingdom values in you that you live out, bring flavor to a bland, rotting world. The values in you as you live the kingdom bring the light to a world of darkness. People will experience the kingdom when we live its values; this helps us realize how to be effective agents of salt and light. We have to ask the question: Do those things describe me?

- Then, people are invited to experience the kingdom of God when we live the values of Jesus' community in our daily ordinary.
 - o We can't be like the guy who almost OD'd on soy sauce. Yes, you heard me right. Back in 2013, Fox News shared a story about a young man who drank a quart of soy sauce, went into a coma and nearly died from an excess of salt in his body, according to a case report. The nineteen-year-old drank the soy sauce after being dared by friends. Now that's a brilliant reason to do anything. Fortunately for him, he is the first person known to have deliberately overdosed on such a high amount of salt and survived with no lasting neurological problems.
 - o I share this story because it applies directly to how we live. We are called to bring salt and light to our world so that they can experience the kingdom of God, not so that they can be blinded by the sun or OD on sodium.
 - o So the question we have to answer is: Are we shining and seasoning, or are we blinding and gagging?

- Let me give you an example of blinding and gagging.
 - o When I lived in Chicago, there were all kinds of festivals and events in the downtown area at Grant Park – the jazz festival, the gospel festival, the Taste of Chicago, the Latin Music festival. The events brought out so many people with food vendors, games, music, and more food.
 - o I went with some friends to several when I lived there. At every festival, inevitably, there would be another group of people who came. They carried signs that said, "Repent of your sins and trust Jesus!" "Jesus is coming." "Turn from your sin." Some even would shout out Scripture about the Lord coming and people going to hell.
 - o I started watching the crowd around the people with the signs and how the packed crowd would part just to try to get away from the people with the signs. I saw no one praying, no one repenting, no one who looked moved or touched in their spirit.

If anything, people were just making fun of them and laughing. Now, I didn't watch them the whole time, so maybe someone did talk to them about Jesus. But, I kind of doubt it. The way they presented their message was too much even for me and I know Jesus!

- Now, is there truth to the message of their sign? Yes, absolutely! But just because it is correct doesn't mean that it is effective. I'd argue that this is pouring a gallon of soy sauce down someone's throat. No one walked away from those signs thinking, "I need Jesus." And I'd be willing to put money on it ... no one walked passed them thinking, "I want Jesus."
- Now let me give you an example of seasoning and shining. Many of you may or may not know that Pastor Wil, my husband, was a driver for Uber for about a year. He did this because he was only working part-time at URI for over a year and we needed extra income.
 - The times he drove were late at night on the weekends because that's the highest surge of when people are looking for drivers. Now, you can guess that people are probably looking for drivers late at night because they have been partying and are too intoxicated to drive themselves.
 - Wil could tell you some stories of some people who got into our car and their conversations. And, he could also tell you of the opportunities that God gave him to shine and to season.
 - See, he could have just done his job and drove people to where they needed to go without interacting much. He would still be doing a service: to get people to their location that's safe for everyone. I mean, after all, he's keeping drunk drivers off the road. But, God wants to use an ordinary Uber part-time job to speak into people's lives.
- So, he could tell you how just by his Haitian accent, people would ask him where he was from. When he would tell them he was from Haiti, people would ask him how he moved from Haiti to Rhode Island. He will tell them that he came to seminary in Indiana and married his wife and that they are both here to pastor at the First Church of God in Peace Dale on Allen Ave. Then, that would lead to other conversations about God.
- And, he could tell you about two friends who he picked up right up the street at Sweet Allen Farm. They asked to go to the Mews. They were going to drink and meet some girls. So, Wil dropped them off at the Mews.
 - Later, he got a call to pick someone up at the Mews. Guess who – the two friends. They struck up a conversation with Wil at this point. The one friend in the front seat was chattier than the other. They decided to try another bar and asked Wil to take them to Charley Os in Narragansett.
 - An hour or so later, Wil got a call to do a pick-up in Narragansett and guess who he picks up? At this point, they had resigned to just go home. The one guy said to Wil, "There must be a reason I keep getting you tonight. All the bars I've been are no fun because there's no girls there. So, what do you think I should do driver?"
 - Wil said, "That's a good question. I'm glad you asked that question. The fact that

you keep getting me three times is not a coincidence. There are other Uber drivers around. Maybe you have one thing left to try.” The guy asked, “What’s that driver?” Wil replied, “You can try Jesus”.

- At this, the guy kind of scoffed. He said, “I can’t try Jesus because I have three problems. I love to drink, I love women and I love money.” Wil said, “Well, if you give your life to Christ, he will help you with these problems.” The guy asked, “How?”
 - Wil said, “You are thirsty for something and you went to two bars and couldn’t find anything that could satisfy you.” The man asked, “Then, what am I thirsty for?” “Something more than the bar, more than women, more than money,” Wil answered.
- Right then, he asked Wil to pull over on the side of the road, he looked at Wil and asked, “What do I need to do to give my life to Jesus?” Wil said, “Confess to him and accept him as your Lord.” “How do I do that? Wil answered, “I can do a simple prayer with you.”
- So, he looked at his friend in the back seat and said, “I think we should do that.” The friend asked, “Well, can we come to church tomorrow to do that?” Wil answered, “Sure. No pressure. You can do it here or in church tomorrow. I’ll be looking for you.” Wil gave them a church card. Unfortunately, we didn’t see them the next day.
 - Now, the friend was a distraction and stumbling block to that man’s salvation that night. But, the seed of the kingdom was planted. That conversation he had with an Uber driver would not be something he will easily forget. It will replay in his mind the next time the bar, women or money can’t satisfy him.
- See, it’s really easy to carry a sign around in a crowd. More than likely, no one will even say anything to you if you do. It’s even easy to do a Kindness Outreach. I know most people probably don’t think so. But, it is. It’s easy to go on a mission trip. See, in those instances, you are with a group of people, sharing the love of Jesus. It’s easy to smile for a couple of hours and serve people for a couple of hours during an outreach program when you’re with other people.
- It’s a lot more difficult to be Jesus in the ordinary and in the mundane.
 - But it’s in the trivial day-to-day stuff, at the office, at school, at the gym, on the job that people need to experience Jesus when they experience us. It’s in the trivial day-to-day stuff that we need to be salting and lighting, not gagging and blinding.
 - Think about your daily routine. Think about your coworkers. Your classmates. Your neighbor. The person you see at the bank or grocery store. The people you run into while you go about your day. Know this—people will experience the kingdom from you in the normal, and in those moments the normal becomes extraordinary as people taste and see ... from you ... that the Lord is good.
- Finally, we bring the *I Love My Church* experience and the kingdom of God to our culture when we build bridges of love to those in our culture and community.

- I hope that if we've learned anything over these last few weeks, we've learned that loving the church isn't about the building, it's not about the programs or the tradition or history. It's about relationships—our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. But it doesn't stop there. We also have to love those outside of these walls.
- Think about the very first week when we read the command that Jesus gave in John 13:34 & 35 to love one another and he ends it by saying, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
 - Here's the thing: How can all people observe us having a reputation of love if we are never around people outside of church people?
 - You can't season and shine when your ordinary is separate from the bland darkness.
- I know for a lot of years in the church, there was this teaching that told us to stay away from the sin of the world, including the people who sin. We should stay away from anything and anyone that was not in the church. We need to come together and keep each other holy. Being too involved with others, unless you have to, could result in falling away from God.
 - Because of that mindset, we've lost countless people from knowing the truth of Jesus' love for them and to know why the church exists. It's how the church has this reputation of not being welcoming or loving and instead being judgmental.
 - How many friends do you have who aren't Christians?
- Look, church, Life groups, and the rest of our programs assist us to grow and become a stronger community of faith. The deep friendships we have with one another are vital to encouraging us and building us up in true fellowship. Through those things, we are strengthening our saltiness and brightness if you will.
 - But if we never interact with people outside of our church, then we have failed. We are to live Jesus' values while in connection with our world.
- And, as a church, we've got to ask ourselves the hard questions. One of those hard questions is, "If our church ceased to exist, would the neighborhood mourn? Would they say, 'No! You can't go!' Or, if we were to cease to exist, would the neighborhood even notice?"
 - We must be a church that they would miss—not for our own sakes or our own reputations, but because they are experiencing Jesus when they experience us.
 - Listen, I'm tired of people asking me where the church is when I tell them I pastor at the First Church of God. My goal is that everyone in this community has heard of the First Church of God – not just people of color who have family connections with some here, but everyone. I want the word on the street to be, "Oh, the First Church of God? I've heard of that church. They do a lot in the community."
- What are ways that you can begin making connections with your neighborhood? First, we've got to be strategic and intentional, right? We've talked about that over the weeks.

- Start with praying for some people. Who are you praying for that God might use you to bring them into a kingdom experience? You've got to be praying for someone – not 20, start with one to three.
 - Then, link in to what we have going on here with Kindness Outreach Programs. Start with being intentional and serious about inviting people to come to our big events at the church. You can't really say "I love my church" if you don't invite anyone to come to church. That's like saying "I love my husband, but I don't want my friends to meet him." We would say, then that's not love, right?
- Then, we need to look around at what is going on in our community and see what also interests us and make some connections.
 - Maybe it could be by joining a sports league, a book club, or volunteering at the animal shelter or teaching kids how to play a sport or make jewelry. Maybe it's being involved in the school where your kids attend. Maybe it's reaching out to those you work with or your neighbors and inviting them over for dinner.
 - When I first moved here, I was approached by Sue Gustatis who was the director of the Jonnycake Center at the time. She asked me about being on the Board of Directors. I saw it as an opportunity to make connections in the community. It was a time commitment that sometimes was a pain to fulfill.
- What has come out of that connection? If you were at the baptism service a few weeks ago, you heard her share it was on the board that I met Christina Rose. God was pursuing her. God used our friendship to bring her back to him.
 - It was on the board that I met Jeff Melish, a local attorney in town who attends the Church of the Ascension. Through that connection, we have built a relationship with that church and have worked together on different projects.
 - And, through that connection, the Jonnycake Center supports our Champagne Heights Cookout and has committed to supplying all the food for that event.
 - One connection has made an impact in many ways. Think of how God could use you to make a connection that has ripple effects in impact.
- You know, it's been said that Christians make horrible neighbors. Why? Because Christians have a reputation of being judgmental, they aren't friendly, they are nosy and are looking for something that you're doing wrong. Isn't that a horrible reputation to have?
 - Let that never be said of us. If we are reflecting the values of the Kingdom through our daily lifestyle and are genuinely showing people how the true kingdom of God is, it never will be said of us.