

The Church Before the Watching World

“Salt, Light, & Sweet Aroma: Leaving A Lasting Impression In The Name of Jesus”

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West Side Church of Christ
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Scripture Reading

“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. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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” (Matthew 5:13-16 ESV)

PLAYING A MORE BEAUTIFUL SONG

Think of the most beautiful thing you have ever actually witnessed. Maybe a hidden waterfall at the end of the road to Hana. Perhaps it was that concerto in Venice playing *Adagio in G Minor*.¹ Maybe it was hearing your wife—at the very moment she became your wife—saying the words “I do.” Beauty holds us spellbound, in rapt attention. All the cares of the world seem insignificant, and all who share our witness to the moment are friends and brothers. Unlike ugliness, beauty unites and heals. Perhaps that is why when King David approached the Lord with his list of requests, he wanted only one thing: to gaze upon the *beauty* of the Lord (Ps 27:4).

In Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*, Ulysses is on his way home from the Trojan War. He had been warned about the song of the Sirens. Sirens are monsters, disguised as gorgeous women with the most beautiful voices; and as sailors sailed past their island, they would assure them that their only desire is to help each sailor pass the time by

¹ Try Tomaso Albinoni’s version (with the Chamber Orchestra of Miemo). 13 million downloaders on *Spotify* can’t be wrong!

singing beautiful melodies. But their beauty disguises their real ambition: to kill everyone and everything that comes their way.

To guard against the siren song, Ulysses fills his ears with wax, and does the same for his men. But Lot's wife turned back for a reason. And Ulysses tied himself to the ship mast, and then had the wax removed from his ears, because ignoring doesn't fill the longing.²

But there is another epic poem, written 5 centuries later. In this one, the Greek god Apollo gives a lyre to a man named Orpheus, who could play more beautifully than anyone before or since. A group of sailors were ready to set sail, but they feared the sirens song. Ignoring the sirens with wax in your ears doesn't always work; something better was needed, and those sailors figured out the solution. The ship set sail with Orpheus aboard, and soon they sailed by those rocky islands and the sirens began to sing. When Orpheus heard their voices, he drew his lyre and played a melody even more beautiful, drowning out the Sirens song.³

When faced with the option to stuff up his ears and try to ignore the alluring voices, he chose instead to introduce something more beautiful than any that could rival.

When faced with the options of welcoming the siren song, withdrawing from the fight by stuffing up his ears, or conquering through violent power and might, he chose to offer up a more beautiful song.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

People need a good story, says David Martin.

“We need a good story, a moral landscape of admonition and promise, for people who have sustained a bad Fall, but nevertheless seek a better city, and en route that story should tell them who is their neighbour, how to find a way home after prodigal expenditure in a waste land, and how to recognize a pearl of great price when they see it.”⁴

² Homer, *Odyssey*.

³ Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* (3rd C BC). The comparison can be found in Martin Luther King, “How the Christian Overcomes Evil,” in Taylor Branch, *Parting the Water: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p.99-100. For this reference I am indebted to Dr. James C. Howell, “Surrounded in Beauty,” a sermon at Duke Chapel, Jan 23, 2005.

⁴ David Martin, *Christian Language in the Secular City*, Routledge Revivals (Routledge, 2018).

The Christian story is a good story. We see it in Jesus. We hear it in the preaching of Paul. And we witness it every time someone dares to play a song more beautiful than the alluring sound of cultural Sirens. How do we do that? How do we be salt, light, and a sweet aroma in our world?

GENTLE NATURE THAT LACKS COERCION

The first practice is to adopt a gentle nature that lacks coercion. One thing I notice about salt, light, and sweet-smelling aroma is that each metaphor conjures up the image of something gentle that aids but doesn't force.

The kingdom of God is not about force, but persuasion. Not by physical might that threatens, but by a remarkably spiritual life that convicts.

We have examples of using threats of violence and the use of force in the New Testament. For example, the people wanted to make Jesus King that way. But notice what happened:

“When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (John 6:15 NRSV)

It was common then, just as it is common now, for the kings of the earth, the rulers of nations, the masters with servants, and the CEOs of corporations to “lord it over” those under their charge. To exercise authority through power, control, and manipulation. But Jesus said in the gospel according to Matthew (20:25) and in the gospel according to Mark (10:42): “It shall not be so among you.” That is why Paul will later tell the Corinthians, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work *with* you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24). In the kingdom of God there is no master and servant relationship among us; we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). There is no greedy bargaining or attempts to manipulate or clamoring to gain power over one another. We are all servants—equal servants—under one and only one Master. Coercion is not in the Christian dictionary.

And that attitude, that selfless, humble, servant-hearted mindset that was also in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5) spills out into our relationships with others. The fruit that the Spirit gives includes “gentleness,” or, as another translation puts it: “not needing to force our way in life” (Gal 5:23 MSG). Love, writes Paul, “does not insist on its own way,” or, as another translation puts it, “Love...doesn't force itself on others” (1 Cor 13:5 MSG). When Paul wanted to gather up a collection to help some needy folks down the road, he was careful to frame his request as an appeal, not a command, so that your gift would

be a “voluntary gift,” writes Paul, “and not extortion” (2 Cor 9:5). Christianity is a voluntary society, marked by self-giving love.

Failure to realize this fact led to one of the greatest blunders in history. Church historian Rodney Stark says that the church grew from 0.001% to 56% of the population (or 40% per decade) in just 300 years when—for the vast majority of that time—Christians had no power in the Roman Empire. But in 313 Constantine, Emperor of Rome, becomes a Christian. Shortly thereafter, Christianity moved from a bottom-up attraction model as a philosophy of life, to a top-down coercive and legislatively forced way of life. In 381, Theodosius is Emperor of Rome and presents himself as a devout Christian. “For centuries after his death,” says one source, “Theodosius was regarded as a champion of Christian orthodoxy who decisively stamped out paganism.”⁵ Shortly before Charlemagne was crowned Roman Emperor by the Pope in 800, he campaigned against the Saxons by offering them two options: get baptized, or we’ll cut your head off. Many refused, and in retaliation, the Saxons set churches on fire and slaughtered missionaries. In return, Charlemagne ordered 4,500 Saxons that were in prison to be massacred (known as the Massacre of Verden). And thus was born Christianity by both legal and lethal force.

I don’t know about you, but I’m a fan of the freedom of religion. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the Christian philosopher and political theorist John Locke. Locke lived in England in the late 17th century, and he wrote a highly influential book making the case for the freedom of religion—a case that would later be made at the Constitutional Convention and in the halls of Congress as the United States would draft a Bill of Rights starting with the “freedom of religion.” But did you know that, according to Locke, this whole “freedom of religion” thing is a highly Christian idea.

Here's the way he reasoned. There is nothing more important than getting to heaven. But there are lots of views out there about how to do it. If the state imposes one way of worshipping, condemning, making illegal, or executing all others, and it turns out to be wrong, you’ve doomed the entire population! Besides, if the one religion the state imposes is Christianity, then you’ve got a second problem—whatever you are imposing is not Christianity! Because Christianity is a voluntary association. So, by imposing it, you’ve ruined it.

Therefore, to be fair to everyone in the world, and to be true to your own Christian faith, you must allow Christianity to be one voluntary option, and you have to let people choose to belong or not belong. You must allow other ways of doing church, other ways to worship, other religions to co-exist, because otherwise, there can be no

⁵ “Theodosius I,” Wikipedia article. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius_I

voluntary movement, only forced. And if people don't voluntarily choose Christianity, they haven't chosen Christianity at all. Coercion and consent are a contradiction in terms. We are never forced to be free. He applied this view to everybody except atheists; but Roger Williams applied it even to atheism—on Christian grounds: that we are made free and equal in dignity by a God who wants us to choose. One must be free to accept or reject; otherwise, it isn't faith. This view came to find a home in the American bill of rights, where freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly were viewed as "first liberty"—priority liberty—the freedom to be free.⁶

I happen to think they were right. But I want us to think through the implications of that. The left needs to think about this when they try, through legislation, to force those of a religious persuasion to buy into things their conscience rejects, or demand that they participate in that which violates their religious doctrines. But this goes both ways. We need to see the challenge on the right as well. In the wake of September 11th, there were calls for the tearing down of mosques, and petitions to keep any new ones from being built. We need to think about that when someone in the news shares concerns about anti-Semitism or anti-Semitic rhetoric, and we make fun of it and then tell some off-color joke meant to demean Jewish people. How does that offer a gentle nature that shows a loving spirit with a bottom-up, attractive model with deep appreciation for those who believe in God and believe they ought to live for and honor God, but have yet to see our way of how best to do that?

A REAL POWER TO EXPOSE DARKNESS; PRESERVE THE RIGHT

The second practice is to appreciate the power to expose darkness in an attempt to preserve what is good and right. One thing I notice about salt, light, and sweet-smelling aroma is that each metaphor conjures up a real change that acknowledges something wrong that needs to be made right. Salt says this tasteless meat needs something better; light says this darkness needs to be weakened; and sweet-smelling aroma says this foul smell needs to be sweetened.

While Christians adopt a gentle nature that attracts and persuades rather than coerce, Christianity also shines a light in the darkness and that light exposes all that is wrong in the darkness. Our children love to sing, "this little light of mine; I'm gonna let it shine." "Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine." But when you let the light shine, it acts as a disinfectant.

⁶ See Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity* (IVP, 2013), pp.63-97.

I believe there is a time for Christians to call evil for what it is. There is a time, a place, and a platform to call the nations to account. There is a way, a season, an opportunity to declare God's judgment on sin and on those who persist in their godless ways. Oh yes. And Christians will have far more credibility when we do that, if we have first exposed the darkness among us.

Take the sex abuse scandal, as David French notes. Do you know which one I'm talking about? I could be talking about all the Catholic Diocese that have harbored priests who preyed on children. I could be talking about one of the largest networks of churches. I could be talking about one of the most influential evangelical apologists of a generation. I could be talking about the largest Protestant denomination in America. I could be talking about the largest Christian camp in America. I could be talking about the largest Christian University in America. Or, I could be talking about a preacher in our movement who preyed on children, and the elders told the victims to stay quiet, after all, "exposing this would hurt the church." Take all the situations I've just shared, and we are talking about the Christian witness before the world. "Each one has been racked by massive scandal," notes David French; "and in a weird way I think it's caused some folks to double down."⁷

There are no perfect Christians. And church is no museum for saints; we are a hospital for sinners. We all know that. But there is a huge difference between everyone at AA realizing that they are surrounded by a bunch of drunks, and having meetings every week where you cover up the fact that anyone even struggles with a desire to drink! Acknowledgement and exposure is the whole point! Repentance and confession are not one-time acts you do when you want to get into the faith; they describe the lifestyle of those who are *of* the faith.

I want to say with the Apostle John, "My little children, I write these things so that you may not sin! Stop sinning! But if we do sin, we have an advocate, Jesus Christ the Righteous. So go and sin no more is the first call to the church. But the second is this: own up to it, declare it, bear the consequences of it, and let even that be a model for the rest of the world. Let the church never again be involved in a cover-up. We shine our light, no matter what.

REQUIRES A LONG-TERM CONNECTION

The third practice is to adopt a patient long-term perspective and embrace a loving, long-term connection. One thing I notice about salt, light, and sweet-smelling aroma is

⁷ David French on *No Small Endeavor* podcast with Lee C. Camp, Episode 86.

that each metaphor conjures up a lasting difference that comes from a long-term commitment.

What good would it do for salt to touch meat for a moment, then to clear any semblance of salt from the meat? What effect does one have by flipping on the flashlight for just a second? How helpful is a gasp of sweet aroma in a room full of stench? Each can become a token rather than any real change.

We say often that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. I saw a fb meme that said Jesus hung out with such people to expose their wrongness, not to enjoy their company. I think that is ridiculously wrong and an exercise in missing the point! The very fact that Jesus is in their presence exposes their wrongness for sure. Imagine standing in the presence of such pure blinding light. But he came to offer a touch to outsiders to tell insiders “I enjoy their company! In fact, I want them to be my company forever!” And so we say “How can you have company with people who do wrong and hurt your heart, Jesus?” And Jesus replies, “I know it’s hard to understand, but it doesn’t keep me from sharing company with you!” And I love it!

When I went to grad school in Memphis, Jack Lewis told us all this great line: “Jesus spent 30 years preparing for a 3-year ministry. All we ask is that you spend 3 years preparing for a 30-year ministry.” Can I add a line to that? Jesus spent 3 years living with, working with, eating with, serving with, known sinners whose sin was not only grotesque, but it would also lead to his own death. So if you know that you want to call out a particular sin, a particular sinful way of life, a particular approach to an issue that turns your stomach, and you want to go on record telling everyone on Facebook how evil it is and how wrong everyone is who does such a thing, you can...but if you want to follow the model of Jesus, may I encourage you to spend 3 years listening to and learning from and sharing life with the people involved in that sin you’re thinking of, and then—when you see your opening—ask how you can die for them.

THE GOAL IS TO PRESERVE AND MAKE BETTER

The final practice is to adopt the goal to preserve and make better. One thing I notice about salt, light, and sweet-smelling aroma is that each metaphor conjures up an image of not destroying but redeeming.

Here is where the contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world is stark. The kingdoms of the world divide the world into “us” vs. “them.” They see friends and enemies. They see loyalists and rebels. They see people to control and people to conquer.

But the kingdom of God sees children of God made in the image of God everywhere we look. We see lost people and formerly lost people. God has placed eternity in our hearts, which means we see hungry and thirsty people, and those with living bread and living water to offer.

It was a Sri Lankan evangelist by the name of D. T. Niles who said, “Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find the bread.”

What if we saw others not as enemies, not even as ungodly, but as *lost*? What if our goal was not to destroy but to redeem? What if we saw every single person as a potential convert? How would it change the way we think and live in this world?

What we need, said Brennan Manning, is “the ability to see. To see...the butterfly in a caterpillar, the eagle in an egg, the saint in a selfish person, life in death, unity in separation, God in the human and human in God and suffering as the form in which the incomprehensibility of God himself appears.”⁸

Here is a great misunderstanding—within the church and outside of the church. We don’t turn a blind eye to evil, sin, and pain. We don’t pretend there is nothing to oppose, and everything is sunshine and rainbows. Of course not. We believe in Divine justice. We believe in calling others to account. We believe there are sins to atone. But while judgment is always part of God’s Word, it is never the last word. It is not the last word of the gospel. It is not his ultimate message. John 3:17 is forever in our Bibles, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world; he sent his Son into the world to save.”

In the beatitudes—which we will be looking at in just 2 short weeks—Jesus calls blessed those who hunger and thirst for justice. I know most of our Bible say “righteousness.” But the Greek word is the same one the ESV translates “justice” in Hebrews 11:33. The root word is the same one used in Luke 18 for the parable of the widow who kept saying “give me justice against my adversary.” It is good and right for Christians to cry out for justice. “How long, O Lord,” cries out the martyrs in Revelation 6, “how long before you will judge and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10).

Christians who turn a blind eye to injustice are not being true to our faith and are not obedient to the Judge of all the earth. The courts are there for a reason. Acquitting the guilty is not true justice, and Christians should recognize that in this life—for the good of all—the punishment should fit the crime. We thirst for justice. But look what follows

⁸ Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness: What Happens When God’s Fierce Mercy Transforms Our Lives*.

right after this? “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” And “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” How can ‘thirsty for justice’ be paired with ‘longing for mercy’? Only in this: Christians look beyond vengeance and revenge—they look to an even greater ultimate end of redemption.

[Video Clip: Brandt Jean & Amber Guyger]

We, the redeemed, are thirsty. But we are not thirsty for blood. We are thirsty for the living water of Christ to drown out all the evil impulses in the perpetrators; we are thirsty for the elixir of life to melt the heart of stone; we are thirsty for the blood of Jesus Christ to bind us together. We want evil to stop; we want perpetrators to be brought to justice. And then...we want even our enemies to be given right standing with God through the blood of Jesus Christ because we, too, put Christ on the cross. And we, too, have been rescued from death row.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO BE SALT & LIGHT

Salt and Light are a call to pay attention to our character. May we cultivate the virtue of courage that will lead us to live out a faithful story.

My actions are not just piecemeal. Every interaction we have becomes an element in the story that others will tell about how people treat one another, about what church people are like, about what Christians care about, and who you remind them of. So, it’s worth asking, what story do my actions tell? It takes courage to stand as a witness to the world. We want to engage the culture in winsome ways. Being salt and light in a dark and tasteless culture calls for courage and action—but only if it is bathed in humility and coupled with deep awareness.

We all want to emulate the light of the world. But to tell the right story, in this situation, or that one, should I be a flashlight, a streetlight or a flood light? Context matters, and discernment is required to know what is good, honorable, and praiseworthy in each new circumstance.

It is time to ask the most obvious question: *what exactly is it that we are trying to do?* Are we trying to live and share the gospel? The gospel is good news that brings joy to the entire world. The gospel is an announcement that addresses our deepest longings and confronts the idols we have in our pockets. So, what would it look like to have a theory of culture that leads with the gospel? What would it look like to see with gospel eyes?

Are we trying to reach a post-Christian culture? If so, *how* we approach things might be just as important as the ends we seek. For this generation, we must allow authentic, loving behavior to take the lead over verbal critique. How we live—shining like lights in the world, drawing people to Christ’s beauty and goodness—may be the catalyst for further invitation to consider questions of truth. This may, at times, mean retreating from the encroaching darkness; but other times, it means finding creative and attractive ways to fill darkness with light.

In his book *Vanishing Grace*, Philip Yancey asks what if we viewed others—even our “enemies” perhaps, or even just people on the other side of the aisle—as thirsty people who are unaware that we hold in our hands the water of life? Unlike the kingdoms of the world, what if we organized for leaven, not leverage? What if our engagement with culture was not first to storm the castle or flee to the hills, but to climb the walls with loving witness for people?

In an interview over the book,⁹ he tells the story of a Christian filmmaker who teaches at a Christian university and, one year, takes his students to a popular film festival. There, they attend a film making fun of church experience and the Christian faith. The people in the room were deeply enjoying and identifying with it. You could tell that these people had been wounded. During the audience feedback time, the professor stood up, and said this: “Hello, I’m an Evangelical Christian.” Everyone got quiet. You could hear a pin drop. “I just want to apologize for the way the church has wounded some of you. I don’t agree with everything in the film but some of its true, because I know it’s true, and we are wrong. And I just wanted to say I am sorry.” Then he sat down. And the most remarkable thing happened. All these people came up and said “I’ve never heard a Christian apologize. Thank you so much for that. Let me tell you my story.” He’s been going back every year since, and he takes students with him every year. And for the first time, Christians have a voice in that room.

Yancey shared this story while being interviewed by *Focus on the Family* podcast. The interviewer himself said that reminded him of a story from one of his own encounters. Coming to a community that he sensed would be upset about their presence, he had reached out to someone in the LGBTQ community and asked them to meet with him in a coffee shop. While in conversation, the interviewer said, “I think the only reason that I wanted to meet today is to let you know something—and that is that God loves you.” The man began to cry, and looking him in the eye, said this: “I never expected someone from *Focus on the Family* to tell a gay man that God loves him.”

⁹ Philip Yancey interview, “Engaging the Culture in Winsome Ways (Part 1),” *Focus on the Family* YouTube channel.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jS1KicfPu4g&ab_channel=FocusontheFamily

There's a principle there, responded Yancey. And it goes back to the gospel. Here's the principle. Every religion says God loves "good" people. That's not new. But look through the gospels and you'll find that Jesus says God loves bad people. And that story will resonate so much stronger the day we realize that "bad people" includes me.

Issue-oriented glasses focused on *culture* lead us in one direction; but "grace eyes" focused on *people* are often powerful shifters. Grace eyes see Jesus taking sides, but he's hardly ever standing where you would have assumed. Jesus took a stand on adultery; it's clear. There is no one in the New Testament who takes a stronger stand. But when the dust cleared, he was standing with the adulterer, not the Moses-quoting insiders with stones in their hand. And that stance allowed him to share with her the twin message of gift (no condemnation), and demand (no more sin).

What Jesus offered, and what Paul did well in a pre-Christian culture, was a fantastic mixture of genuine interest in people, persuasive speech that spoke their language, and a consistently holy and attractive life that matched their words. Could that not be helpful in our context as well?

Yancey points out that in the first 300 years of its existence (before it was the dominant culture of the Empire), Christianity grew phenomenally. But most Christians were not preachers or missionaries. They were just different! And people said, "I want to be like that!" We tend to think that engaging "culture" is about big moves, with massive amounts, for big gains. But most of our cultural engagement involves how we treat the people next door. Instead of thinking in terms of success or achievement, let our main focus simply be on serving where the Lord has placed us, doing the best with what we have, and leave the results to God.

Christianity is often painted as an anti-intellectual, fear-led mob that seeks only to banish those who disagree. Let us be different. Let us re-engage our culture through knowing, loving, and serving those around us. Instead of being known for what we are against, let us recapture a thirst for knowledge, relearn the art of Christian persuasion,¹⁰ and reaffirm a commitment to consistently live what we say we believe.

VOWING NEW LENSES

Josh Ross is the preaching minister for the Sycamore View church in Memphis. He, too, preached a series of lessons on how to think about Christ and culture, church, and society, being salt, light and leaven in the world. He then challenged his church

¹⁰ Os Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (IVP, reprint 2019).

with 7 vows or commitments based on those lessons. I have modified his list and adapted it for our own purposes, but I want to share 6 vows I am taking to grow my soul. 6 vows to help me become more salt, light, leaven, and sweet aroma in the world. And I would like to encourage you to take them with me.

1. I will daily confess that Jesus is Lord of my life and nothing else is.
2. I will pledge my ultimate allegiance to the kingdom of God.
3. I will choose to become a better listener to God and other people.
4. I will resist allowing any media outlet to become the primary way I think about culture and the world or how I interact with culture and the world.
5. I will strive to be a peacemaker, refusing to view the world as ‘us’ vs. ‘them.’
6. I will practice hospitality and serve others as a way to learn, grow, and invest in other people.

Will you take these vows with me?