

## GO BOLDLY

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### On Being the Salt of the Earth in Politically Polarized Times | Matt 5:13

Over the past few weeks, we've been describing this circle we're in together here as sort of like the Base Camp of the Christian life. It's HERE that we learn some of the crucial principles and practices that help us rise toward our full potential when we're out THERE on the stormy mountain of life. What we do HERE at Base Camp is important, mainly because it equips us to go out THERE. Today, I invite you to think with me about what it looks like to **GO BOLDLY** with the mindset and message of Jesus out into the storm that is contemporary politics.

It must be said that American society has never lacked for a wide range of opinions on important matters. As Finley Dunne once wrote in the *Chicago Evening Post* way back in 1895, politics has always been closer to a boxing match than to a friendly game of beanbags. But it's not your imagination if it feels like our ordinary differences and debates have now gotten pumped up into massive barriers between us. There is hardly a workplace, church, or family gathering where people don't walk on eggshells around certain topics hoping to avoid an explosive encounter; while others, it seems, are just jonesing for a fight. The two recent assassination attempts against a presidential candidate and the wildly different narratives about who is responsible for this are evidence that we have reached a new altitude in terms of conflict and polarization.

As we move toward a major election in November – and then live with its results -- do you suppose the conflict is going to settle down or get more amped up? I'm betting that we're going UP. I'm guessing that the kind of curiosity and empathy, rationality and civility that is so important to helping people make progress on personal or policy matters is going to suffer. I think it might even be tempting for YOU and ME to get caught up in all the battling and become part of the problem ourselves.

In the midst of all this, it seems important to remember HERE that Jesus called his followers to play a distinctive role when we go out THERE. I intend for you to be the salt of the earth, said Jesus (Matt 5:13). I take that to mean that like a little bit of salt on food, even a few Christians living with the character of Christ, can improve the flavor of a community and help preserve it against decay. But Jesus was very blunt in warning his disciples that if they lost that saltiness – that distinctive character – they would become useless to his purposes.

So, my practical question today is: What distinctive things would it be helpful for you and me to keep in mind and to try to do in our conversations and relationships with others in these days ahead? In other words, **how can you and I be salt and stay salty** amidst the massive flood of emotions and messages that could otherwise flood us and wash away our distinctive Christian character? Let me throw out some possibilities.

FIRST, let's make sure we acknowledge the importance of politics and prayerfully engage with it. I recognize that there are some of us who get so overwhelmed and exhausted by all the conflicts and the endless partisan diatribes these days that we just want to ignore altogether what's happening in the political realm. We think: I'll focus on the personal and spiritual issues, not the public and secular structures. I get why we're tempted to go there, but I've noticed that the heroes of the faith we meet in the Bible don't do that. When his people were enslaved or wandering in the wilderness, Moses got involved in political as well as spiritual leadership. When a time of famine was on the horizon, Joseph got involved in the government of Egypt and crafted policy and processes that would feed millions. When a slew of hostile nations threatened to destroy Israel, David stepped into political and military leadership. Esther used her political influence in Persia (modern-day Iran) to rout a plot that would have led to the genocide of the Jewish people. God's prophet, Daniel, served in the cabinet of multiple administrations of the Babylonian empire. Nehemiah was chief-of-staff to another president of Persia and left that only to head-up in Jerusalem a massive infrastructure rebuilding project.

The quality of government and the character of those who govern is a major theme of the Bible. Political policies have huge implications for the quality of human life which is why, I think, the Apostle Paul suggests that we should spend more time in prayer for politicians and office-holders: **Let intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people... for kings and all those in authority that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives (1 Tim 2:1-2)** -- whoever is in office right now and for whoever sits in a place of authority afterward. So, think more positively about the role of government, as messy as it is. Use your vote to advance the people and policies you feel can advance the most good. Pray more for those in the process. That's the first constructive thing Christians can do in this conflicted time and encourage others to do.

But let's remember that our ultimate hope is not in human empire but in God's kingdom. In every election cycle, we hear voices talking as if the person who wins this election will usher in either heaven or hell. It's usually neither that good nor that bad. We've lived through a lot of imperfect administrations and managed to correct our course over time. But there will come a day (probably NOT the first Tuesday of November) when everything changes for the better and forever. On that day, no one will dispute who has won or deserves to govern. On that day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:10-11). At Christ's coming, heaven and earth will be united. There will be no more crying or mourning or pain. There will be perfect peace and justice as Christ makes all things new (Rev 21-22). No human government can deliver that kind of result. As my friend, Mike Woodruff, recently said: *Our salvation won't be landing on Airforce One*. We need to keep reminding one another to hope firmly in God and hold our politics more gently.

In these conflicted times, it also seems important to boldly confess that our number one problem is self-governance. Our second President, John Adams, wrote in 1798: *"We*

*have no government capable of contending with human passions unbridled... Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people... [and is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.]* The major problem with our country isn't Democrats or Republicans or any particular figure. It is sin. It is the stubborn, selfishness and blindness of the human heart. It is the unwillingness to bow humbly before our Creator and to be keepers of our brother's and sister's well-being. Government is what becomes necessary when people won't govern themselves. Which is why helping people come to know the Loving Lordship of Jesus Christ might just be the most politically revolutionary thing we could do in our time.

I think we could also help bring down the temperature of our time if we could respect that not everyone who thinks differently about certain political policies is an ignoramus or a servant of Satan. There's so much contempt and demonizing in political discussions today. People talk as if it's us "good and intelligent" people versus those "bad and stupid" people. Do you ever hear that? ARE there SOME evil or idiotic human beings out there? Sure. But I think that's the wrong frame for what is happening today. Some years ago, I stumbled across some research into what is called Moral Foundations Theory. I explained it in full in a sermon series I offered called, MAKING SENSE OF THE MADNESS. You can find it in our Media Library.

In a nutshell, Moral Foundations Theory suggests that if you travel the world and study history, you will find SIX MAJOR MORAL VALUES showing up again and again. These same six values keep shaping societies across cultures and across time. Some people suggest that these values arose to serve evolutionary purposes. That seems plausible but, more fundamentally, I believe these six values are something of what the Bible means when it talks about "the image of God" in all people. If we had the time, I could easily illustrate how these six values are the major moral foundations the Bible seeks to emphasize again and again.

If you really think about it, these values are at the heart of so many of our political and cultural debates today. Again, I wish we had time to unpack all I've listed here. We're going to supply a handout that holds this chart that you can use to reflect on this further. But I just wonder what might change in America, if we could stop thinking that we are at war with all those bad and stupid people out there. What if we looked around and saw brothers and sisters instead – imperfect but largely decent people like you and me – and recognize that we are often battling over how to prioritize one good moral value relative to another good value. What if some of these people we're inclined to denigrate or dismiss are actually fighting for a value that GOD feels is important and that is part of his image inside us too but which we haven't brought to mind or prioritized the same way on this particular issue.

Have you ever noticed that in order to galvanize their supporters, politicians and political parties often try to reduce complex issues to single values? One side says: The issue at our border is about AUTHORITY (vs chaos) or about LOYALTY (Americans First)

or about PURITY (no more fentanyl). The other side says the immigration issue is about CARE (where's your Christian compassion for the poor?) or about LIBERTY (give me your huddled masses yearning to breathe free) or about FAIRNESS (you or your ancestors got to come to this land of opportunity, why not others?)

The challenge is that you and I are called to follow JESUS in a complex world – a world in which problems can't be boiled down to a single value. No political party encompasses the full range of God's concerns or holds the critical tensions required to reflect the kingdom of God. I think this is something of what Jesus meant when he said: **My kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36)**. To find the way of God's kingdom, we need a more civil dialogue about the tough topics of our day. We can't be too quick to harden our positions to the extent that we no longer see or accept the additional values that may need to be stirred into a mix that would please heaven. Which is why one of the most constructive things you and I can do amidst these conflicted times – and encourage others to do – is to turn off the POLITICS CHANNELS and talk more with your neighbors, co-workers and family members and about the blend of values that each of you believe make for a greater commonwealth. I say turn off the channels because it is very hard to keep listening to them and to keep loving your neighbor. Here's the blunt truth: People make money by whipping up and dividing us. There are people who have found that the shrillest voices of panic, suspicion, and contempt gain one of the most valuable commodities in America today: market share. Market share means money for my station or my podcast or my cause or my comfort. So, if you and I are going to get mad at someone, let's get mad at the people who destroy our ability to even talk to people who don't see things exactly like we do.

As I move to a close, let me summarize by saying that you and I can play a crucial role in these conflicted times. We can do so by remembering for ourselves and reminding others of these truths. But the most essential thing we can do is to remember WHO WE ARE. We're going to be under great pressure in this heated environment to think of ourselves as first and foremost a red person or a blue person or followers of this pundit or candidate. But you and I must decide to be followers of Jesus Christ FIRST. Is that the way you think of yourself? Is that the primary identity that informs how you come at politics and public discourse?

Jesus clearly calls his followers to live by an ethic that is very different from the cage fight tactics being modeled by extreme voices in our day. They say we must demonize and destroy these enemies. But Jesus says **love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you (Luke 6:27-28)**. The extreme voices say it is perfectly fine to assume you already know what drives other people and OK to lash out against them. But the Apostle James says that as followers of Christ we must **be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry (Jas 1:19)**. You will be told by both sides of the political spectrum: This is an emergency? You must join the war to save democracy!! But God says: **Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt 6:33)**... and **as far as it**

**depends upon you, live at peace with everyone (Rom 12:18).** Many voices in our time will urge you to proudly assert your rights and interests against all those people who have more or who are trying to take from you. But the Word of our Lord says: **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit... not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Phil 2:3-4).** As we move through this political season you'll be pummeled with all the scandal and the secrets and the seamy sides of each candidate and the flaws in their records and policies. You'll be drowning in negativity. But the Apostle Paul says: **Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy think about such things... And the God of peace will be with you (Phil 4:8-9).**

At the end of the day, nothing I've said here will make a difference unless you and I decide to be followers of Jesus FIRST. As Christ plainly said: **A house divided against itself cannot stand (Mat 12:25).** You and I can't be double-minded – living Jesus' way in church and living by the world's way in politics. Jesus said: **Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters (Mat 12:30).** Either we're primarily citizens of the kingdom of God, doing our best to live Christ's way and to gather others into that kingdom OR else we're probably just citizens of a passing empire, participating in the process of scattering people further from God and his purposes and, according to Jesus, not with Him at all.

Who are YOU? How will you choose to live? As you GO BOLDLY out into the world, what will be the truths that will guide you in this season ahead? Who can you share this mindset with? Don't lose your saltiness -- your distinctive way of being a Jesus Person. It will make a difference if you and I can truly be Kingdom Citizens in these Politically Polarized Times.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Which of the principles or practices suggested resonated with you as especially important?
2. What of the observations or recommendations made would you want to challenge, modify or ask more about?
3. What additional attitudes or actions might you suggest for Christian disciples to be constructive witnesses to Christ's Way in these tumultuous times?