

“Hope for a Decaying World”
Matthew 5:7-16
July 5, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Since the Supreme Court’s ruling on June 26 legalizing same-sex marriage, I have felt the need to remind us all of what the Bible says about how we should respond to this. Many who are far more qualified than I have written about the legal and political side of this issue. In the providence of God, the passage I had planned for us to cover today provides clear and helpful instruction from Jesus about our response to issues just like this one.

One matter not addressed in this passage that needs addressing under the general topic of the Bible’s perspective regarding same-sex marriage is the whole question of the morality of homosexuality in the Bible. For a more detailed treatment of this, I would refer you to the sermon page on the church’s website for two sermons on this topic preached on October 27 and November 3 of 2013. The conclusion drawn in those sermons is that the Bible’s uniform position throughout is that sexual expression is limited to a committed marriage between a man and a woman. Since marriage is an institution created by God, any attempt to change that definition amounts to rebellion against God. Until recently, the unanimous position of all churches, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, throughout the 2000 year history of the church, has been the same. Marriage between a man and a woman is the only proper context for sexual expression.

My purpose this morning is not to make the case for the traditional, biblical view of marriage, because I think most of us need no convincing on that front. Rather, I would like for us to consider how the Bible would have us respond to the decision announced by the Supreme Court 9 days ago, a decision that puts those of us who believe in traditional marriage in a distinct minority. Jesus has much to say to us about this, so let’s consider it now.

I. The World in Its Natural State

We learn two things from this text about the natural state of this fallen world. First of all, the world hates righteousness and attempts to silence all who speak up for it. Jesus says that we will know we are on the right track when we **“are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”** (v. 10). Unrighteousness will not be content to “live and let live.” As long as there are spokesmen who stand up for what is right, attempts will be made to silence their voices. Jesus reminds us that it has always been this way, **“for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you”** (v. 12). When King Herod married Herodias,

his brother Philip's wife, John the Baptist told him that he was acting unrighteously. Herod's response was to imprison John and later have him executed. I don't believe Christians are in any imminent danger of being imprisoned because of our position on marriage, but I think we can count on coercive measures that attempt to silence our opposition. I think we are seeing this already. Chief Justice Roberts wrote in his response to the decision of the majority, "It is one thing for the majority to conclude that the Constitution protects a right to same-sex marriage; it is something else to portray everyone who does not share the majority's 'better informed understanding' as bigoted."

Christians have been here before, in a position where the Bible puts us at odds with the law of the land. We were here in 1973 when abortion was made legal. We were here when people were treated as mere property and slaves were bought and sold, even to the point of breaking up marriages when a husband or wife were sold apart from their spouse. Much of the German church was here in the 1930's and 40's in Nazi Germany, when the rights of Jews began to be slowly eroded and eventually lost completely in the horrific genocide of that era. I'm not trying to equate our moment with any of these, except to point out that The Bible and the law of the land differed in all these cases. Some in the Church caved in to the prevailing currents of their culture, and others stood firm for the teaching of the Bible. It should not surprise us that we are here again. Where we do need to be careful is in making sure that we are on the side of the Bible, and not merely caving in to the drift of our culture.

A second thing we learn from this passage about the natural state of our world is that it tends toward decay. That's what Jesus' metaphor about salt teaches us. Salt was used primarily to preserve meat from rotting in a world that had no refrigeration. The natural condition of our world is to decay, just like unsalted meat. Suppose you leave town for a couple of days, and when you return home, you are met with a horrible smell as soon as you open the door to your house. You walk into the kitchen to discover that someone left some raw fish on the kitchen counter, and it has now rotted. You don't blame the fish by saying, "This is the worst fish we have ever bought, because it rots too quickly." Rather, you ask, "Who forgot to put the fish in the freezer?" The application is this. As we see our culture sink into ever greater moral decline, our response shouldn't be that of self-righteously complaining about how things are getting so bad. Rather, we should let this motivate us to pray and seek to have the preserving influence Jesus says we are to have. That brings us to our next point.

II. The Church as Salt

When Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth," the pronoun *you* is emphasized. Martin Lloyd-Jones translates this "You, and you only are the salt of the earth." And notice that Jesus is simply stating a fact, not giving a

command. He doesn't say, "Become the salt of the earth," because we already are as a result of being his followers. When Jesus says that we are the salt of the earth, he has in view our character. It is the character he has just described in the Beatitudes. Salt of the earth people are the poor in spirit, the humble who mourn for their sin, the meek, etc.

As we have already stated, the principle use of salt that Jesus had in mind was its use as a preservative of meat. Christians are very useful to the world in preserving it from the decay that comes when its sinful impulses are allowed to remain unchecked. The warning Jesus gives is to guard our saltiness, by which I understand him to mean that we are to make sure we don't lose our distinctives as God's people. Two choices are before us here. On the one hand, we can maintain our faithfulness to God, and expect persecution if we do so, and serve the very useful purpose of preserving our society from its natural tendency to decay. Or, on the other hand, we can cave in to the moral relativism of our day and become useless, good for nothing but to be trampled under foot. It is those churches that compromise in order to be relevant that become worthless, and those that stand firmly against the sinful drift of culture that end up bringing the most good. It is certainly true that some Christians have become overly harsh in condemning homosexuality, and we need to remember that Jesus calls us to act lovingly and kindly even to those who might persecute us. But I believe the greater danger we face is the one Jesus speaks of here, that of losing our saltiness through compromising with the values of the world.

Allow me to mention a couple of applications of this before we move to the next metaphor of light. I think we need to prepare ourselves to help our children stand against the immense pressure that is going to be brought to bear upon them. It will not be merely the pressure to tolerate those with different convictions about marriage than we have in the church. As Christians, we agree with the call to tolerance as we renounce all coercive or manipulative efforts to make people agree with us. What our children will face even more of in the future is the pressure from adults in their lives to force them to agree that same-sex marriage, and even all homosexual behavior between consenting adults, is okay. Their early readers in elementary school will not just talk about Dick and Jane and their mommy and daddy, but Dick and Jane and their 2 mommies. Through our families, our Sunday School, and our youth group, we need to help our children learn to stand firm for God's word and for biblical marriage.

Second, I believe we should prepare to bless those who hate us. Those who define marriage as the Bible defines it are now the minority. We are already being branded as narrow-minded bigots. We are hated because we are falsely accused of hating others. That's what Jesus said would happen, **"when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely"** (v. 11). But the call of Jesus is clear. He calls us to bless our enemies.

We will be called upon to pick up the broken pieces resulting from the damage done by our cultural drift into this kind of sexual permissiveness. We should do so with joy in our hearts.

III. The Church as Light

Jesus says that we are the light of the world, bringing truth to a darkened world. I believe he is referring to the truth of the gospel. We bring light to the world as we bring the gospel to the world. Jesus points out that it is the very nature of light to shine so as to be seen. A city on a hill can't be hidden. No one goes to the trouble of lighting an oil lamp, even spending money on the oil being burned, only to cover up the lamp with a basket. On the contrary, lamps are raised up on lampstands in order that their light might shine.

What exactly is Jesus telling us here? I believe he is telling us to remember that the gospel is our greatest weapon, and we must not hide it. The gospel is simple enough, and it can be summarized in two simple points: judgment and grace. We can't leave out the judgment part without completely losing the gospel. The sin of every human being deserves the judgment of God. Our basic sin is that we don't honor God as God. We don't honor him by submitting to his law. God sends judgment, not just in the future, but now. Romans 1 says that his present judgment for ungodliness is unrighteousness. He allows people to get what they want, but because they don't honor God, what they want ends up destroying them. Romans 1 names a homosexual component to this, and adds at the end of the chapter that **"they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them"** (Ro. 1:32). With last week's ruling, we as a culture have taken this step into institutionalizing the sin of homosexuality. This is the judgment of God. It will bring great harm to those who engage in this, and it will bring harm to our society. But the gospel has a second point. Though all of us, heterosexual and homosexual alike, are under God's judgment, Jesus has graciously taken upon himself the judgment we deserve. In love, his death was a substitutionary death that we might be forgiven. All who trust in him can receive his full forgiveness as a gift.

But it is not enough to declare this gospel, as true as it is. If the gospel is to have any reception in people's hearts, we need to live the gospel. The reason is that people's beliefs are formed by their hearts more than by their reason. Suppose you have a friend who is convinced he is dead. You take it upon yourself to convince him that he is wrong, and in the effort give him three textbooks from leading medical scientists to show him that he is indeed alive. You show him in all the books that the unanimous conclusion of medical science is that dead people don't bleed. Then you say, "Give me your hand." He does so and you cut it, whereupon it starts to bleed. Your friend has a shocked look on his face as you ask him, "Do you see now what conclusion we ought to draw from the fact that you're bleeding?" He replies, "Yes, I do." "So what's the

conclusion?” you ask. He answers, “The entire community of medical scientists is wrong. Dead people do bleed.” He sees in the evidence what he wants to see in it. The problem is in the heart, not the mind.

Jesus knows that our words alone, no matter how true they are, will not be enough to convince people of the truth of the gospel. So he adds a reason to his command to let our light shine, **“so that they may see your good works.”** These good works are the last four of the beatitudes. Let’s look at the first of those as an example. **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”** (v. 7). What makes us merciful toward others? The Bible is clear that it is an experience of God’s mercy toward us that gives us merciful hearts toward others. This tide of sexual license will not be turned by political action or by clever arguments or by sociological studies showing that children raised by a mother and father do better than all other combinations. It is the gospel alone that will do it, and the gospel must be proclaimed with our words and shown by our actions. The action that is most needed in this case is that of being merciful. What does Jesus mean by that? He means that we are called to come alongside people as fellow sinners in need of the grace of God ourselves, not as people with the right answers who attempt to shame people into right behavior. As the old saying goes, “Sharing the gospel is just one beggar telling another beggar where he can find bread.”

Why is this heart of mercy so important in the fight we find ourselves in today? It is because sexual sin leads to shame. We need to understand that the energy behind the legalization of same-sex marriage is the intense desire to escape shame. That’s why it will not stop with last week’s ruling. Attempts will be made to force all to conform our thinking and moral values to such behavior. It is the gospel that is the answer to shame. As Dr. Brene Brown said in a famous Ted Talk, “The answer to shame is ‘Me too.’” We say to those battling shame from living outside God’s law for sexual purity, “I too have thought that I could find satisfaction through seeking sexual pleasure outside God’s boundaries. Jesus has lived purely for me, and he has forgiven me and given me a new righteousness that takes away my shame.”

CONCLUSION:

We need to remember that Jesus is on his throne. He doesn’t call us to solve this problem all by ourselves. He calls us to the relatively modest role of being salt and light by being faithful to him and to the gospel. He is able to direct things to his appointed end. This is no time to panic and move to a Christian commune in Montana. We must be faithful in our day and in the sphere of our influence. Remember that God is not panicking. Any evil that he allows to be raised up in the end only serves to advance his kingdom.