Salt and Light
by John Stott

Text: Matthew 5:13–16

Topic: How Christians influence society

Big Idea: We must repent of Christian pessimism and reaffirm our confidence in God's power.

Keywords: Christlikeness; Church, mission of; Commitment; Culture; Example; Influence; Light; Ministry; Power; Prayer; Salt; Service; Truth; Wholehearted Devotion; Witnessing

Introduction:
• Are Christians powerless or can we exert influence in this world?
  • Illustration: Historian Kenneth Latourette described Christian influence on society.
  • Jesus used metaphors of salt and light for our responsibility in a post-Christian world.
  • Christians are not merely distinct from but are to have influence upon society.
  • Christians must not be preoccupied with survival.
  • There are four ways we can have power in our world.

Christians must use the power of prayer.
• 1 Timothy 2:1-2
• We must share the global concerns of our global God.

Christians must use the power of truth.
• Romans 1:16
  • All of God's truth has power greater than the Devil's lies.
• 2 Corinthians 13:8
• John 1:5
  • Illustration: Solzhenitzyn's quote that "one word of truth outweighs the whole world."
  • We need to argue the truth and goodness of God's moral law.
  • Illustration: A Sociologist found that living together actually had negatives effects upon couples, particularly women.
  • Illustration: Christians should argue for Sabbath rest based upon the psychological and physical needs of human beings.
  • These arguments are based upon belief in the power of truth.

Christians must use the power of example.
• When people see our good works, they give glory to our Father in heaven.

Christians must use the power of the group.
• Illustration: Robert Belair says a culture can be changed by 2 percent of its people.
• Jesus used a small group of dedicated people, and they turned the world upside down.

Conclusion:
• We must repent of Christian pessimism and reaffirm our confidence in the power of God.
Alienation was originally a Marxist word and Karl Marx meant by it the alienation of the worker from the product of his labors. When what he produces is sold by the factory owner, he is alienated from the fruits of his earned work. But nowadays the word *alienation* has a much broader meaning for powerlessness. Whenever you feel politically or economically powerless, you are feeling alienated. Jimmy Reed, the well-known Marxist counselor in Glasgow and leader of the Clydeside Ship Workers when he was rector of Glasgow University said, "Alienation is the cry of men who feel themselves to be the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. Alienation is the frustration of ordinary people who are excluded from the processes of decision-making. Have we any influence? Have we any power? That's the question.

The word *influence* can sometimes be used for a self-centered thirst for power like in Dale Carnegie's famous book *How to Make Friends and Influence People*. But it can also be used in an unselfish way of the desire of Christians who are refused to acquiesce in the status quo, who are determined to see things changed in society and long to have some influence for Jesus Christ. And that is the question. Are we powerless? Is the quest for social change hopeless before we begin? Or can Christians exert some influence for Jesus Christ.

There is a great deal of pessimism around today that grips and even paralyzes people. They wring their hands in a holy kind of dismay. Society is rotten to the core, they say. Everything is hopeless, there is no hope but the return of Jesus Christ. I was sorry to hear Edward Norman, this year's wreath lecturer, dean of Peter House in Cambridge, say in an interview on radio "People are rubbish." But people are not rubbish. If I may respectfully disagree with the dean of Peter House, who isn't, I'm afraid, probably here to answer back. But then I'm answering him back.

But seriously, people are not rubbish. People are men and women made in the image of God. Oh, indeed they are fallen, but the image of God has not been destroyed. Are they capable of doing no good? The doctrine of total depravity, which means that every part of our human being has been tainted by the fall, does not mean that we're in capable of doing any good. Jesus himself said that although you are evil you are able to do good things and give good gifts to your children. Now of course we believe in the fall. We believe that when Jesus Christ comes again he is going to put things right. If you develop a Christian mind you don't concentrate exclusively on the fall of man and the return of Christ. You also think about the creation and about the redemption through Jesus Christ. And we have to allow the creation to be, as it were, qualified by the fall, and the fall by the redemption, and the redemption by the consummation. And the Christian mind thinks in terms of this total purpose of God, which includes the creation, the fall, the redemption, and the consummation.

So if we are pessimists and we think that we are capable of doing nothing in human society today, I venture to say that we are theologically extremely unbalanced if not actually heretical and harmful. It's ludicrous to say Christians can have no influence in society. It's biblically and historically mistaken. Christian churches had an enormous influence on society down its long and checked history. Listen to this conclusion of Kenneth Latourette in his seven-volume work on the history of the expansion of Christianity:
No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of men like the life of Jesus Christ. From that brief life and its apparent frustration has flowed a more powerful force for the triumphant waging of man's long battle than any other ever known by the human race. By it millions have been lifted from illiteracy and ignorance and have been placed upon the road of growing intellectual freedom and control over the physical environment. It has done more to allay the physical ills of disease and famine than any other impulse known to man. It's emancipated millions from chattel slavery and millions of others from addiction to vice. It has protected tens of millions in exploitation by their fellows. It's been the most fruitful source of movement to lessen the horrors of war and to put the relations of men and nations on the basis of justice and of peace.

Christ and his church have had an enormous influence. And if only we were out and out for Jesus Christ in the fullness of our commitment, then we would have far more influence than we do.

So, away with pessimism and away also with blind optimism as if we thought Utopia was around the corner. No, Christians are sober-minded, biblical realists, who have a balance doctrine of creation for redemption and consummation. We are not powerless. I'm afraid what we are, rather, is often lazy and short-sighted and unbelieving and disobedient to the commission of Jesus.

My text is Matthew 5. Here are verses becoming increasingly familiar to many of us who see their great importance today and began to look at them again. The Sermon on the Mount after the beatitudes, verse 13: "You are the salt of the earth." Verse 14: "You are the light of the world." Verse 16: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father, which is in heaven."

In both these metaphors of the salt and the light, Jesus teaches about the responsibility of Christians in a non-Christian or sub-Christian or post-Christian society. He emphasizes the difference between Christians and non-Christians, between the church and the world, and he emphasizes the influences one ought to have on the other, normally Christians on their non-Christian environment. The distinction between the two is clear. The world, he says, is like rotting meat. But you are to be the world's salt. The world is like a dark night, but you are to be the world's light. This is the fundamental difference between the Christian and the non-Christian, the church and the world.

Then he goes on from the distinction to the influence. Like salt in putrefying meat, Christians are to hinder social decay. Like light in the prevailing Darkness, Christians are to illumine society and show it a better way. Now it's very important to grasp these two stages in the teaching of Jesus. More Christians accept that there is a distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian, between the church and the world. God's new society, the church, is as different from the old society as salt from rotting meat and as light from darkness. But there are too many people who stop there. Too many people whose whole preoccupation is with survival, that is, maintaining their distinction. The salt must retain its saltiness. It must not become contaminated, they say. The light must retain its brightness. It must not be smothered by the darkness. That is true. But that is survival. Salt and light are not just a bit different from their environment. They
are to have a powerful influence on their environment. The salt is to be rubbed into the meat in order to stop the rot. The light is to shine into the darkness. It is to be set upon a lamp stand and it is to give light to the environment.

That is an influence on the environment that is quite different from mere survival. And I want to talk for the rest of my time on this influence. What is it? Let me suggest to you a few ways in which we have power.

**Christians must use the power of prayer**

One, the power of prayer. I beg you not to dismiss this as a pious platitude. It isn't. The power of prayer. There are some Christians who are so social activist that they never stop to pray. They are wrong, are they not? Prayer is an indispensable part of the Christian's life and of the church's life. And the church's first duty toward society and its leaders is to pray for them. We had it in the epistle for today. "First of all," Paul says, "I urge that supplications and prayers and petitions be made for all men and for those who are in authority that we may lead a quite and peaceable life in all godliness" and so on.

If in the community there is more violence than peace, more indecency than modesty, more oppression than justice, more secularism than godliness, is the reason that the church is not praying for these things? But I myself believe that in our normal services we should take with increasing seriousness the five or ten minutes of intercession in which as a congregation we bow down before God and bring to him the world and its leaders and cry to him to intervene. And the same is true in the prayer gathering and in the fellowship groups and in our private prayers. I think most of us, myself included, are more parochial than global in our prayers. But are we not global Christians? Do we not share the global concerns of our global God? And these concerns should express themselves in our prayers. The power of prayer.

**Christians must use the power of truth**

Secondly, the power of truth. All of us believe in the power of the truth of the gospel. We love to say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes," Romans 1:16. We are convinced of the power of the gospel in evangelism that it brings salvation and redemption to those who respond and believe in Jesus. But it isn't only the gospel that is powerful. All God's truth is powerful. God's truth of whatever kind is much more powerful than the devil's lies. Do you believe that or are you a pessimist? Do you think the devil is stronger than God? You think lies are stronger than the truth? The Christian believes that truth is stronger than lies and God is stronger than the devil. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 13:8, "We cannot do anything against the truth but only for the truth." As John said in his prologue to the fourth Gospel, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." Of course it cannot; it's the truth of God.

Solzhenitsyn believes that. If you read his Nobel Prize speech, it's called "One Word of Truth." He says, "We haven't got any rockets to blast off. We writers don't even trundle the most insignificant auxiliary vehicle. We haven't got any military might. So what can literature do in the face of the merciless onslaught of open violence?" He doesn't say we haven't got any power. He says, "One word of truth outweighs the whole world." If anybody should believe that it's
Christians. It's true. Truth is much more powerful than bombs and tanks and weapons. The power of the truth.

How are we going to see it at work? Persuasion by argument. Just as we need the doctrinal apologists in evangelism to argue the truth of the gospel, so we need ethical apologists in social action to argue the truth and the goodness of the moral law of God. We need more Christian thinkers who will use their minds for Jesus Christ, who will speak and write and broadcast and televise in order to command a Christian option and influence public opinion.

The American magazine *Seventeen* carried an article called "The Case against Living Together." It's an interview by Dr. Nancy Morclathwell, a sociologist Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio.

She says that for 10 years she's been studying the phenomenon of unmarried couples living together. When she began, she says, she was predisposed towards the custom. "Young people have told us it was quite wonderful." And she said she believed them. It seemed to her to be a sensible arrangement, a useful step in courtship in which couples get to know one another. But her research involving the testing of hundreds of couples married and unmarried led her to change her mind. And she says the things people say living together is doing for them it is not doing, especially with girls. She found them uptight, fearful, looking past the rhetoric to the possible pain and agony.

She makes two points. In the area of happiness and respect and adjustment, she says, "Couples who live together before they're married have more problems than couples who marry first." In every area the couples who lived together before marriage disagreed more often than the couples who hadn't. So she said living together doesn't solve your problems.

A second point was commitment. Commitment is the expectation that a person has about the outcome of a relationship. Commitment is what makes marriage and living together work. But, listen carefully, "Knowing that something is temporary, like living together unmarried, affects the degree of commitment to it. So unmarried couples are less than wholehearted in working to sustain and protect their relationship. And, consequently, 75 percent of them break up. And especially the girls are badly hurt." She concludes, "Statistically you are much better off marrying than living together, because for people who are in love, anything less than a full commitment is a cop out." Now I don't think she's a Christian. But it's a sociological argument for Christian ethics.

I'll give you one other quick example. You can't force people to go to church by legislation. You can't force them to rest on Sundays, nor can we simply quote from the Bible as if that settles the matter. But we can argue with them. We can argue that psychologically and physically human beings need one day's rest in seven and that socially it's good for families who are separated during the week to have a day together on Sunday. We can argue for legislation that protects workers from being compelled to work, encourages family life, prevents people from getting their recreation at the expense of others who are obliged to work in order to give it them. In other words, spectator sports.
In these examples we're neither imposing our Christian views on non-Christians nor are we leaving them alone in their non-Christian views nor are we quoting the Bible dogmatically as if that settled the issue. We are using every argument—physical, psychological, sociological—in order to command the wisdom and truth of biblical teaching. Why? Because we believe in the power of truth.

**Christians must use the power of example**

Third, the power of example. Truth is powerful when it's argued. It's more powerful when it's exhibited. People need not only to understand the argument. They need to see the benefits of the argument with their own eyes. It's hard to exaggerate the power for good in a secular housing estate that can be exerted by a thoroughly Christian family in which the whole community see the husband and wife loving and honoring one another, devoted and faithful to one another, finding fulfillment in one another. They see the children growing up in the security of a loving and a disciplined home. They see a family not turned in on themselves but turned outwards—entertaining strangers, welcoming, keeping an open home, seeking to get involved in the concerns of the community and so on. The power of example. One Christian nurse in a hospital, one Christian teacher in a school, one Christian in a shop or in a factory or office. Christians are marked people. The world is watching. And God's major way of changing the old society is to implant within it his new society with its different values and different standards and different joys and different goals; so that, people see and are attracted. And Jesus said, "They see your good works, and they give glory to your Father in heaven."

**Christians must use the power of the group**

Fourth, the power of the group. The power of a dedicated minority. Listen to the American sociologist, Robert Belair, at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. "We should not underestimate the significance of the small group of people who have a vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a whole culture may be changed when two percent of its people have a new vision."

That was the way of Jesus. He began of a small group of only 12 dedicated people. Within a few years, Roman officials complained they were turning the world upside down. There is a great need for dedicated Christian groups committed to one another, committed to the vision, committed to Christ, who will pray together, think together, formulate policies together, get to work together in the community.

Do you want to see our national life made more pleasing to God? Do you have a vision of what Britain could be again if there was within it a new godliness, a new justice, a new freedom, a new righteousness, a new compassion? Do you repent of sub-Christian pessimism? Will you reaffirm with me your confidence in the power of God, the power of prayer and of truth and of example and of the group and of the gospel? Let's offer ourselves to him, as instruments in his hands, salt and light in the community. This congregation could have enormous influence for Christ in London if it was totally committed to him. Let's give ourselves to him, who gave himself for us.

*John R. W. Stott is rector emeritus of All Souls Church in London, and author of Between Two Worlds (Eerdmans, 1982).*
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