

THE FLAP OF A SEAGULL'S WINGS  
Matthew 5:13-16

INTRODUCTION

In 1998 Gwyneth Paltrow starred in a movie titled *Sliding Doors*. In the film Paltrow plays the role of Helen Quilley who is fired from her PR job. When she leaves she heads for the London subway to go home. At that juncture there are two possible alternatives. One is she arrives at the subway station in time to catch the train and in the other she just misses the train and has to take a cab home. The movie then traces two completely different paths that her life would take. The events that occur depending on whether she catches that train or not supposedly are very different. The idea, of course, is who knows when some small, seemingly insignificant event in our lives might lead to monumental changes.

That same premise plays a role in several other movies such as the 2000 Dennis Quaid movie *Frequency*, but the idea is derived from the work of American mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz. In 1961 he was working on a weather prediction and decided to check the forecast by rerunning the computer model. When he input the data he rounded off one number. Instead of inputting .506127 he just entered .506, a seemingly trivial difference. He was shocked when he ran the model and got a totally different prediction. He was stunned that such a minor change could make such a big difference. In 1963 he published a theory about how seemingly minute differences in a complex system can have enormous consequences. He noted that one meteorologist responded to his ideas by saying that if his theory was correct “one flap of a seagull’s wings could change the course of weather forever.” In 1972 when he was to give a talk at a convention and he failed to provide a title another scientist suggested the title “Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?” Thus was born the now famous theory of the butterfly effect, which tells us that sometimes small actions can have unpredictably large consequences.

Today we will look at Matthew 5:13-16, but as I start I warn you that I am going to say something that will sound pompous, puffed up, narrow and even offensive to some people. It might well seem absurd. But this outlandish thing is not pompous, it is not intended to be offensive, and as ridiculous as it might seem it is true.

## WE LIVE IN A DARK WORLD

Note that in verse 14 he said to his followers “**you are the light of the world.**” Included in that statement is a presupposition that the world needs light. It needs light because it is a dark place. A similar thought is expressed by the apostle Paul in Philippians 2:15. There he referred to the followers of Jesus in the Macedonian city of Philippi as “**children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.**” What a description of the times in which Paul lived. He described it as a “**crooked and depraved generation.**” That sounds like he must have lived during a particularly bad time. His generation was really twisted. But that’s not really the case. Paul was alluding to an Old Testament passage. In Deuteronomy 32:5 Moses, after predicting that the people of Israel would rebel against God, described them as “**a warped and crooked generation.**” Both the Hebrew word translated “generation” there and the Greek word Paul used in Philippians 2:15 could mean people living at a particular time, but it could also refer to a class or group of people. It could mean a tribe or clan. Moses used it to speak of the Hebrew people as a clan. Paul used it to refer to humanity as a race. He said that as a race we are crooked and twisted.

The word translated “crooked” is the word we get scoliosis from. It was used to describe a meandering river or the ringlets of a girl with curly hair. Now there’s nothing wrong with a river meandering or a girl having curly hair. But in the case of a human being’s character the word means something bad. Not crooked in the sense of being a bunch of criminals. It means not following a straight path. Imagine a straight road representing what an ideal human would be like. It is a path that is good and right both for themselves and for others. Paul says the problem is humans inevitably they deviate from that path and produce harm.

The word translated “depraved” seems excessive but the Greek word Paul used means “twisted or dislocated.” Have you ever dislocated a part of your body? When I was a kid one time when we were playing in the front yard I was running across the grass and tripped. I fell and when I did I felt a pain in my hand. It wasn’t that bad until I looked at it. My little finger was fine up to the first knuckle, but there it took a 90 degree turn to the outside. One glance told me that was not right. I had dislocated it. The finger was bent totally out of shape, was no longer lined up with what it should be. Again the picture is of humanity bent in a way that is out of shape from what we ought to be. We saw this when we studied the book of Genesis. Something terrible has happened to the human race. Something has gone wrong inside us all, and as a result we have become a twisted race. Look at the

human condition and at human history and the conclusion is undeniable that something's wrong. We are constantly fighting. We cannot get along.

This does not mean that every single person you ever meet is an evil ogre. I told the story earlier that I had an incident a few months ago for which I was very thankful. While waiting for an airplane when we were returning from vacation I was paged by the airline personnel. I was sure this was going to be bad news. When I went to the desk they handed me my wallet. I had lost it in the men's room and didn't even know it was gone until they returned it to me. Some unknown honest person had turned it in. No money or credit cards were missing. So there are good honest people in this world.

But why should I have felt such relief when I was handed that wallet? I felt relief because I knew what could have happened. If the human race were not "dislocated" I could not just hope but expect that if I lost my wallet someone would just naturally return it intact. I would not need to fear identity theft. Unfortunately, I knew I dodged a bullet there. The most likely outcome of such a stupid mistake is that someone would steal the money from the wallet, take the credit cards and charge merchandise to them, and try to use my bank card to access our bank account. I feared such a thing happening because it happens all the time. Why? Because the human race is dislocated.

C. S. Lewis' science fiction novel *Out Of The Silent Planet* centers on the experience of Dr. Ransom, the main character. He is essentially kidnapped by two acquaintances and taken on a space ship to Malacandra, another planet. On this planet Ransom escapes. Eventually he encounters the beings on this planet. There are several races of sentient beings there. They are all peaceful, honest, gentle and exist in harmony with each other. They have heard of Ransom's planet, which they call Thulcandra, the silent planet. They refer to the people on his planet as "bent" because they steal from each other, they fight and kill. Such things are unimaginable to these peaceful beings. In the story Lewis gives us a glimpse of the reality of life on this planet and how this "generation," the human race, is bent, dislocated, twisted out of true.

That's one aspect of the darkness of this planet. Another is that the human race is desperate for hope. We live in the shadow of darkness. We feel a sense of loneliness, disconnectedness, restlessness and frustration. Life just doesn't turn out the way we hoped or envisioned, then we die. This is an aspect of the darkness of this world. Listen to the words of some recent popular songs. The rock group

called Carbon Leaf sings *The Desperation Song*. Here are some of the words, “Is this all a game? Was this all a ruse? I’ve waited by the phone, cold as river stone. Anxiety. Alone.” In *Weight of the World* Evanescence sings, “Feels like the weight of the world, like God in heaven gave me a turn. Don’t cling to me, I swear I can’t fix you. Still in the dark, can you fix me? Free fall, free fall, all through life. Feels like the weight of the world, like all my screaming has gone unheard.”

In most of our current music and entertainment industry it is preached that the solution for this angst, for the loneliness and despair of this world, is to find that someone to love. Yet those who sing the songs and send the message show us by their lives that they never find the peace and wholeness they long for that way and their love relationships somehow tend to dissolve with depressing regularity.

### WE ARE THE SALT AND LIGHT

Jesus uses two images of his followers that are good news for this dark world. First he calls them the salt of the earth. In Jesus’ day salt was a big deal. It was so valuable according to the Roman historian Pliny the Elder the Latin word *salarium*, from which we get salary, derived from the fact that soldiers were paid in salt. There is some dispute over that. Some say their money allowed them to buy salt, or that they were paid to guard the *Via Salaria*, the salt roads. Whatever the case it is clear that salt was valuable.

We know it was valuable for several reasons. It was used, as it is today, as a flavoring, but back then it probably had an even more important use as a preservative. When someone killed an animal they had a problem. They couldn’t eat all that meat at one time and they didn’t have refrigeration so they couldn’t freeze it. So what do you do with a side of beef? You either invite everyone you know plus some you don’t to one huge party where you eat all that meat, or you have to find some way of keeping the meat from spoiling. One of the way they did that was to salt the meat. Beef jerky anyone?

Personally I’m thankful for salt. It’s amazing how many foods taste so much better with salt on them. I used to think this was the main thing in view in this image. That Jesus was saying it is his followers that bring flavor to this world. But as I have been thinking about this verse I have changed my mind about that. I suspect the more important role of salt in Jesus’ day was as a preservative. I think Jesus was saying to his hearers that what they had was able to keep this world from totally rotting away. They had what was essential to preserve goodness and even life itself.

The parallel analogy Jesus used is light. I find it astounding that Jesus said we are the light of the world. In John 9:5 Jesus said, “**I am the light of the world.**” John 1:9 said he was the light that comes into the world. I can understand that. He came to those living in darkness to bring them light, to bring hope to those living in the shadow of death. The image of being in darkness and having dawn break is perfect for hope coming to hopeless people.

Darkness is hard to deal with. That’s why humans invented electric lights. Everything is harder in the dark. Everything is more ominous in the dark. Have you ever noticed that the monsters that kids fear are under their bed or in the closet are only there at night. No kid fears monsters are going to get him in the middle of the day. It is only at night. Darkness makes everything scarier. Do you fear ghosts? Probably not much. Would you feel it is spooky if you attended a funeral at a cemetery and had to walk through the graveyard in the middle of the afternoon? No one enjoys cemeteries, but it wouldn’t creep you out. But how about if you had to walk through a graveyard at night? You might not be the least bit suspicious, but somehow you feel this atavistic uneasiness. But you only feel it in the dark.

Light gives us hope, calms our fears and shows us reality. It shows us the way to go. This has always been the case for humans, so light has always been a powerful image for us. Jesus says his followers were the light of this dark world. They were what the world needs to see in order to be at peace, find the truth and find their way home. This is a remarkable statement, and it has big implications for us.

## IMPLICATIONS

### GOD WANTS US TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Both of these images call us to be different and in so doing to impact people around us. We are to make a difference in the world. Jesus made the statement that if the salt loses its saltiness it is not good for anything. This of course raises the question of how salt can lose its saltiness. Don’t get hung up on that. Salt does some things in this world. It flavors and it preserves. If it somehow should fail to fulfill those functions what use is it? It has no use and is worthy only of being tossed out.

This is a call to fulfill our function as the salt that we are. He is making the point that if we are just like everyone else in the world what good are we? We have nothing to offer them, nothing we can bring to the world. One thing about salt, you can always tell when it is present. It has a very distinctive flavor. Would you use it

if it didn't have that flavor? I have mentioned that while I am not a big consumer of sweets and desserts I do have some bad culinary vulnerabilities. One of them is potatoes, especially fried potatoes. French fries, hash browns, home fries, cottage fries, I love them. They are way more tempting to me than any dessert other than Laurie's apple pie. But I must tell you that if they don't have the right amount of salt on them they are terribly disappointing. The only thing that can save them then is ketchup. However, in Jesus' day they didn't have ketchup, so he couldn't have used that as an analogy. Besides, "you are the ketchup of the earth" somehow just doesn't have a very catchy ring to it. The point is if there was a shaker of some white crystals on the table and you put them on your French fries but they had no flavor, made no difference at all, would you use it? If you put salt on some meat and it still turned bad within a couple of days, would you keep doing that? Of course not.

Jesus is telling us that yes we are different and that may cause us some difficulty in this world. What Jesus had just said in this sermon is important. In verse 11 he said, "**Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.**" He acknowledged that following him might cause us to experience opposition, rejection and persecution. But then he said rejoice in that for it means you'll be rewarded in heaven, so don't back away from being salty! Yes, the world may hate you, but you are the salt of the earth, so don't let fear of opposition keep you from letting your distinctive flavor be tasted by the world. Being different may result in some opposition and difficulty, but if you are not different then you have nothing to offer the world.

The same message comes out when Jesus talked about us being the light of the world. He said in verse 16 "**let your line shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.**" Don't hide your light. Let it be seen even though it will be obvious in the darkness.

I like bubble lights. You know those Christmas lights that have a bulb and a tube extending up from it, all filled with liquid? The liquid heats up when the light is turned on and bubbles rise up the tube. For some reason that I cannot discern I have great nostalgia for those lights. We used to have a string of them, but they burned out so we got rid of them. We don't have them any more. But we have this night light, a little dim bubble light. At Christmas Laurie, just to make me happy, puts that little light in our downstairs bathroom. In the dark that light is obvious. It is not bright at all. But it makes all the difference. It is all you need to see your way in the bathroom.

Laurie and I were returning home after a vacation and our late night flight was canceled. The airline lined up a hotel for us and a bus to get us there but by the time they got it all sorted out and we finally got into our room it was 3 in the morning. We were totally exhausted so we just fell into bed and went to sleep. A couple hours later I woke up and had to use the restroom. It was pitch black in that hotel room that was completely unfamiliar to me. I managed to find the appropriate facility, but after taking care of business I couldn't find my way back to the bed. I was still half asleep so not at my best, but I kept blundering around in the dark and couldn't find my way out of that bathroom suite. In a brief moment of irrational panic I feared I was going to spend the rest of the night trapped in there. A bubble light night light in that room would have been all I needed. Just a little bit of light would have made all the difference.

Would it make sense to turn on a light then put a blanket over it? We are not to do that. We are to let our light shine. Be salty, be that different flavor, let your light shine, let people see the difference. Sometimes we might feel that maybe we're kind of dim bulbs, that we don't glow very brightly. Remember the image of the little night light. It may not be powerful but in the dark it is obvious and it gives needed light. So let your light glow. Don't hide it.

This is what you were made by God to do. We are created to make a difference in this world. This is what we all want. God has put in all of us a desire to have some kind of impact on others and on our world. Years ago I used to play hockey with some guys from our church. I played both roller hockey and ice hockey at various times. I was equally bad at both. Even though I did not have the skills to be a goal scorer, I wanted to at least put the puck in the net some time. I knew I couldn't do it on a regular basis, but I did want to score. I can remember most of the very small number of goals I scored. One of them was a classic example of the only way I could get the puck past a goalie. One of my teammates shot the puck and it missed but stopped behind the goal. I got it on my stick, looked up and saw a teammate skating down the middle of the rink toward the goal. If I could pass the puck to him he might have a chance to score. I fired a pass, but as I did a defenseman from the other team skated in and tried to block it. The puck hit his skate and bounced straight back past his goalie into the net. It wasn't luck. I planned it that way! Not. But the point here is why did I want to score? I saw this same thing when I was coaching. The kids placed a huge emphasis on being the one to put the puck in the net. It's because all who play want to make a difference! They want to have an impact on the game, and the biggest impact is scoring. Get the ball into the end

zone in football, make a basket in basketball. Drive a run home in baseball. Everyone wants to make a difference.

You can see this in so many ways. Often you hear about people who want to make a name for themselves. What that means is they want to have impact in this world. All of us knows that if we are part of a group of “friends” but whether we show up for an event they are having or not doesn’t make any difference, we feel unwanted. We want it to make a difference, because we want to mean something.

The desire to make a difference in this world is built into us. I think it is God-given. If you are a believer in Jesus this is great news. You are salt and light. You are created to make a difference in this world, to impact other people’s lives. That’s why you feel the pull of that desire. This passage tells us that you have what is needed to do the very thing that you most want to do.

#### **WE ARE WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS**

I mentioned early on that I was going to say something outlandish, something that might even sound prideful. Well this is it. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are what the world needs. For a moment just consider the importance of light. Without light there would be no life on this planet. Light is essential to warm the world. It is essential for photosynthesis, which is necessary for plants to live. Plants provide the nutrition necessary to sustain life ultimately as well as absorb carbon dioxide and give off oxygen. All of that requires light. The world needs the light you have that badly. The world thinks it needs more money, more power, status, recognition approval, better government, more security, better education. What it really needs is the light you have. It needs you to shine!

What an outrageous thing to say. But Jesus claimed it was true. When we understand the historical context of this statement it will become even more real to us. This was early in Jesus’s ministry. He was still up in Galilee teaching people who lived in that area. The overwhelming majority of the people who heard this speech which we call the Sermon on the Mount, were uneducated and poor. They were farmers, fishermen, shepherds and tradesmen whose lives were a constant struggle just to get by and have enough food to eat for another day. They were the rabble, people with no influence, no power, and no status to speak of. They were looked down on by the leaders of their own people, and were not even noticed by those in the places of power in the Roman Empire. They knew they didn’t matter. They knew that those with power viewed them with disdain if they thought of them at all. Imagine Jesus giving this speech to some peasant farmers in a village in



some rural, backward, downtrodden area in Haiti. It was to these humble, unimportant people that Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.”

You can be quite sure that those humble people were stunned. No one had ever said anything like that to them. In fact, what Jesus said seemed preposterous. No one listened to them. No one cared what they thought. They were of no consequence. And yet Jesus said “you are the light of the world.” You are what this world needs. They were not what the world needs because they had all the answers. They could not solve the problems of Israel. They had no way to solve all the problems of the human race. Yet Jesus said they were the light of the world.

How so? How could this be possible? Go back to the very beginning of the sermon. In verse 3 Jesus said, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**” The people who have the key to the kingdom of heaven, to eternal life, to being accepted and loved by God, becoming a new kind of humanity, were people who started by admitting the poverty of their own soul. They started by knowing how far they were from what God wanted them to be and how hopeless their attempts to ever change that. They admitted that and looked to God for a rescue coming purely from his mercy. They believed that Jesus had come to bring them that rescue. That’s what our world needs! That is the solution to lives biggest problems!

This absurd thing that Jesus said proved to be true. His disciples, fishermen, tax collectors, farmers, nobodies in this world, would change the world forever. They would revolutionize the world, not by being powerful, smarter than everyone else, forcing everyone to do what they thought best, but by humbling themselves, finding grace and life through Jesus, and then loving and serving their world. They brought hope to the world and changed it forever.

Yes, it seems absurd to say we are what the world needs. As absurd as it was for Jesus to say those things to those humble people so long ago. But it was true then, and it is true today. In coming weeks we’ll explore ways to be salt and light in this world, but for today remember that it starts with you letting the light of hope in Jesus Christ shine in you. You never know when the light you shine, even if it is very small will be exactly what someone needs. It may be simply your hope in the middle of a crushing situation. It may be the grace you return to an unkind or mean person. It may be a word of love or encouragement you share with someone. It

may be that gift of generosity that sustains a desperate person for another day that turns that life around.

A critical turning point in my life came in a conversation with a man who never knew how much of an impact he had on me. He probably doesn't even remember me, and I am sure he would not remember this conversation. And out of the conversation I can only remember one thing he said. We were talking about my future and I was telling him I didn't want to be a pastor because I felt churches had an unbiblical view of pastors. He said, "Why don't you change it?" That one comment turned me in an entirely different direction. For him it was one minor comment he probably never thought about again. But my life was totally changed by it. It played a crucial role in what I've done now for 32 years. It was the butterfly effect in my life.

Erwin McManus tells the story of a friend of his named Dave. In Dave's job he had encounters with UPS driver who delivered packages to him. This guy was very talkative, and often would occupy Dave when he had other things to do. But Dave, a follower of Jesus, always tried to be patient and listen with an encouraging ear. After some time the guy told Dave big news, he was getting married. He wanted Dave to come to the wedding. Dave had no intention of going, but he did the usual thing and said maybe. The guy would repeatedly talk to him about coming to the wedding. Dave was working on an excuse. The last time Dave saw him before the wedding the guy said, "I'm so happy you're coming to the wedding." That weekend Dave didn't want to go, but he felt trapped. Finally he decided he should go. The wedding went off without a hitch. Dave wanted to hang around the reception just long enough to be polite. But then came the toasts. The groom stood up, expressed how happy he was, thanked everyone for coming, then said, "I especially want to say how thrilled I am that my best friend could be here today. I want you all to know my best friend, Dave." Dave was stunned. In his mind he had just tried to be polite and kind to the guy, but to that guy, he was his best friend. As a result of the seemingly insignificant thing of being kind to him, the guy and his wife started coming to a Bible study with Dave, and eventually they became followers of Jesus. A seagull flapped its wings, and big changes resulted.

## WE HAVE ENORMOUS VALUE

I don't think of myself as being very important in the world. Of the 300 million people that live in this country do you know how many have never heard of me, how many have lives that have not been touched even a little by my existence? I would estimate that number at 300 million. I don't mean that I've never touched

anyone's life. I just mean that whatever that number is it is so small if you subtracted it from 300 million you would still have 300 million in round figures.

But Jesus said I, along with you and all who know him and follow him, are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. We are what this world needs, whether they notice or not. Whatever the world may think, you and I have value that cannot be calculated. What is the value of light? It is too high to calculate. That is the value that you have in Christ. My desire this morning is to remind you of who you are and what you have to offer the world. It is to call you to see yourself in that way and to understand that because of what Jesus Christ has done for you and in you, you are now what the world needs. You are now equipped to be the light in this dark world. You are capable of fulfilling the desire you have inside you to make a difference in this world. Yes, it seems absurd to say that this little band of people can make a difference, but we can, and that difference will send ripples throughout the universe forever.

This passage reminds us that in every encounter we have, in every group we are a part of, we must remember that we are the salt and the light, that we can make a difference. Perhaps it will be a word we say or an action we take, or maybe it will be the hope we have or the spirit we display, but we are the light of the world, and it can shine in every situation.