

“Showing Up”
by Rom A. Pegram (7/29/18)

Today, we begin the 4th part of our series entitled “Christian”, and if this is the first time you’re with us, I’ll try to catch you up quickly. This series will go through Labor Day weekend, and once we get through today’s message this series is going to go to a whole new level. So, whatever you do, don’t go anywhere; you’re not going to want to miss what’s ahead...

To date, we’ve been talking about the word ‘Christian’ or the brand ‘Christian’ and all it means or doesn’t mean. As said previously, the word ‘Christian’ is only mentioned 3 times in the Bible (NT) and it’s never defined. In reality, it was a derogatory word used by those outside of the faith ... to describe those inside the faith. And, unfortunately, you can make it mean just about whatever you want it to mean these days, because it’s that loosely defined...

BUT Jesus gave his followers a brand or label that’s *clearly* defined; and, for all who’ve been with me the past few weeks, you already know the term: *disciple*. Followers of Jesus took this term seriously! And *I want you to think today about what they did*. When you visit Rome today, for instance, on the top of just about every building in modern-Rome you find ... *crosses*. Now, before you fast-forward too quickly and think to yourself, ‘Well, of course there’re crosses; the Pope lives there,’ I want you to look back with me. Here’s a little *mystery of history* you might want to consider...

If we would go back to about 64-65 A.D., Nero’s just burned the city of Rome. He needs a scapegoat and decides to pin his dastardly deed on that new Jewish knock-off cult from Palestine called the *Christians*. He tells people the Christians burned the city and sends his henchman throughout Rome to round up all the Christians. He has this thing called *Nero’s Circus*, but it wasn’t really a circus as we know it; rather, it was a large arena. And in that arena, he burned Christians, fed them to lions, and basically made sport of all who were brought there. So, as we go back in time, *that’s what was going on...*

Then, we go outside the city of Rome and visit a farm; behind the farmhouse is a barn, and in the back of that barn huddles 3 Christian families that have fled from Rome. They know they’ll never be able to go back to the city. They’ve lost everything they had ... and if anyone finds out they’re Christians, they’re in serious danger; there’s a bounty on their heads and you can imagine what would happen if they were caught!

We sit down on the straw with these 3 frightened families, their children crying, the men scared to death—not knowing what to do, and we ask them this: *Did you know that in just a matter of time, Rome will be adorned everywhere with crosses—not wooden crosses of crucifixion, but decorative crosses that’re signs of being Jesus-followers?* And one day this movement you’re a part of is going to be so big it’ll be internationally known—one of 3 major world religions; one day all those temples in the city you just fled from will be tourist attractions; the day is coming when no one will worship Jupiter; and

one day, instead of Nero's circus where fellow believers are being put to death, there'll be a huge cathedral built in memory of Peter, the fisherman who will become the leader of this movement ... that will one day be called Christianity...

Can you imagine what would run through their minds? They'd look at you like you were crazy! Because ... for them, the worship of Jupiter seemed like forever ... and this movement of Jesus-followers was so small—only one of several dozen religions at that time. And yet, within 300 years—which historically speaking isn't a long time, there are crosses everywhere, everywhere, everywhere... How did that happen?

Well, let me tell you: It didn't happen because Jesus' followers decided to be Christians! It happened because Jesus' followers decided *not* to lower themselves to simply be a brand called 'Christian'! It happened because the followers of Jesus embraced his teachings at such a significant level that they took seriously the label he gave them: *disciple*. So, *what are we doing?* And why would we settle for 'Christian' today? Why would we settle for a brand that we can't even define when Jesus gives us such specific instructions?

Today, in this 4th installment of 'Christian', I want to share with you the speech that got it all going—the speech that everyone rallied around. This was the beginning of the movement, early on in Jesus' ministry. You've heard these words before, but listen with me—now knowing the context they were spoken in—and hear this revolutionary speech with new ears. Here's where it all began: Folks...

Jesus builds the foundation for his movement by telling us about being blessed...

- Matthew 5:1-2 (NIV) records, "Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them...." And now, I'm going to give you the revolutionary words of Jesus that started it all...
- Matthew 5:3 (NIV) – "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." There you go. And then it gets stronger...
- Matthew 5:4 (NIV) – "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." *Really, Jesus? Is that all you've got?* No, there's more...
- Matthew 5:5 (NIV) – "Blessed are the meek [*the gentle, the humble, the considerate*], for they will inherit the earth." *Jesus, can I interrupt you here? I've got a quick question. Meek? Seriously? Are you from around here? Do you know what's going on in our world? Meek? Do you know anything about Rome? Do you know where meekness has gotten us in the past ... and where it'll get us in the future? Blessed are the meek, they're going to inherit the earth? Look around, Jesus. I don't think so...* And then he just continues...
- Matthew 5:6 (NIV) – "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." *With what ... righteousness? Really, Jesus...*
- Matthew 5:7-9 (NIV) – "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." *Peacemakers, Jesus? With all*

due respect, this is getting comical... Peacemakers get swallowed up by Rome; that's their fate... [And Matthew's wondering if this is even worth writing down at this point!]

- Matthew 5:10-12 (NIV) – “¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” I can just imagine the crowd at this point thinking ‘*Maybe he'll do a miracle or something, because this speech is going like nowhere'... Really? This is the start of something new?*

To which Jesus probably chuckled, knowing that 300 years later, this message would be everywhere ... and no one would be worshipping Jupiter anymore! Jesus backs up, takes all this in, and knows they're not going to remember I said all of this anyway, SO (and here's #2)...

Jesus gives us two word pictures that tell us who we are, as his disciples. Jesus' says (Matt. 5:13, NIV): “You are the salt of the earth...” That's who you are! This is not negotiable; if you're a disciples of Jesus, this is what you are...

You ARE the salt of the earth! Now, everyone in Jesus' audience knew what salt was ... and what it was used for. Salt was a preservative. They didn't have refrigeration yet, not in Jesus' day. So, salt was the main preservative that kept things from decomposing. Without some kind of preservative, things would almost immediately begin to rot and to stink ... due to chemical change and bacterial action. So, here's what Jesus is saying to his audience: *You are the preservative of the entire world. You are the preservative. If you don't preserve, the world rots. If you don't preserve, culture stinks. If you don't preserve, things will go in a very, very negative way!*

Imagine, folks, the world to which Jesus was speaking—a world where ‘might makes right’. If you wanted to make things right, you looked for the biggest army; that's how right was determined. Moral issues weren't even moral issues; it was ... who had the biggest sword! In that day, women had no rights; children had fewer rights. Mercy, compassion, and generosity were not virtues of the day; those were things associated with the weak. It was a world, frankly, that we cannot even imagine!

What we find hard to appreciate in our world today is this: *much of what we assume is common human decency is NOT.* It was learned. We still reflect a Judeo-Christian ethic that runs deep in our culture. What we consider typically American today ... didn't just happen. It's how Americans *learned* to be, and we still reflect fundamental values that Jesus taught. So, it's not human nature, nor human decency; it's the reflection of a worldview that says there's one single God and that eventually you give an account of your life to that one single God. And that God loves everyone you come eyeball to eyeball with. And Jesus says, ‘*They're your responsibility. You are the salt of the earth. If you don't preserve, the earth rots.*’ With God, suddenly we have value and we have

worth, and we better be careful how we treat one another, because there's accountability. And Jesus said, *'By this one thing, by this one thing, by this one thing all people will know you're my follower; how you love, how you treat, how you appreciate, how you care for one another.'* And Jesus said, *'That's new and that's different, and if you'll allow it to, it'll take hold. You are the salt, the preservers of the earth.'* And then Jesus goes on and says...

Matthew 5:14 (NIV): "You are the light of the world...."—a second word picture. And many of us would say, *'But I don't want to be the light of the world! Leave me alone. I prayed the magic prayer. I just want to go back and do what I want to do ... and go to heaven when I die.'* And Jesus would say, *'I don't know who taught you that! You are the salt of the earth ... and you are the light of the world.'*

Specifically this scripture says, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." Some versions say 'a city *placed* on a hill' ... which means this act is very deliberate—very intentional. *God meant to make us light!* If you've ever been in Israel at night, up in Galilee in particular (which is where Jesus was teaching), it's black—pitch black. And many villages—for safety reasons—were built up on hills ... and you can see their lights from a very far distance. *They cannot hide their light!* And Jesus says ... *If you're my follower, you are light—just like that. You've been strategically placed where you are.* Then he said (Matt. 5:15-16, NIV):

"Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

In the same way a city is strategically *placed* on a hill, in the same way a light is placed on a lampstand ... 'let your light shine before others' ... so [What?] ... they may see your church attendance and say 'Man, s/he's a good Christian!' Folks, Jesus wants more from us; he wants our lives to be full of good deeds ... that praise might be given to our Father in heaven! *Folks, this is so powerful*, if we'll just hear what Jesus is really saying. He's saying that if we will be salt and light, folks won't just look at us and say 'Oh, they're such nice people' but rather they'll look at us and say, 'Are you kidding me? No one's that generous! No one's that nice! No one treats others with that kind of love!' and then they'll wonder, and investigate, and they might just become disciples of Jesus, too ... because, the truth is...

If you are a Jesus follower, it's because someone was salt &/or light to you! Folks, *I don't want you to ever lose sight of how God's worked in your life! Here's the deal:* Even if I don't know your personal story, there's a huge chance that if you're here today, it's because someone was salt and/or light to you ... and didn't even mean to be!

- They weren't trying to be salt (preservative), but they were...
- They weren't trying to be light (city on a hill), but they were...
- SALT always preserves ... & LIGHT always shows the way!

There was a couple who celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary ... and they were telling their pastor their story one day. And as this pastor listened to this couple's story, he was astounded...

The wife had come from a very abusive background—her father being abusive in every way. At 18 years old, she just wanted to get out of the house, so she married the first guy that paid attention to her—married at 18 years old...

She's married then for 5 years and it's a disaster! She gets pregnant, her husband leaves her to move in with his girlfriend when he found out she was pregnant. This woman then has her baby, she divorces her husband, and—by her own description—she was angry, negative, and emotional walls were built up around her big time; *no one was going to hurt her again!* She was an 'I'm going to control everything from this point forward' kind of a woman, which is why she went into business just to protect herself. And then ... she meets Dave...

Dave is a wonderful Christian man (never been married), and Dave had been praying that God would bring the right woman into his life ... and he wanted it to be a woman he could help. And boy, did God ever answer his prayer!

So, these two get married and it is a disaster sideways! It is just terrible. And for the first 9 years, they really struggled. (Most folks wouldn't have made it past the first 5 in this situation!) Here's the dynamic of their relationship: *She said ... I was so unhappy I wasn't about to let anyone else be happy. I was so uncomfortable around happy people, my goal was to make them unhappy too, because I knew I'd never be as happy as them...*

And *he said ... You know what, I just decided I was not going to be an unhappy person just because my wife was miserable.* And the happier and more joy-filled he got, the more peaceful he became (and these were his words), the more irritated she became. And she worked that much harder to bring him down, because you know ... if she's not going to be happy, ain't nobody going to be happy! And *she said* (as they continued telling their story), *It would just make me so mad. He was going to be the last person to know how God was using him just to expose my sin and expose my negativity and expose my wall. Every single day, he was a mirror of what I wasn't, and a mirror of what I wanted to be, but he was the last person I would ever tell.* That was the dynamic of their marriage for 9 years ... but folks ... salt preserves and light shines ... and something happened: She just broke...

Folks, after 9 years, she just gave up and fell apart. It was *his* joy, it was *his* peace, it was *his* salt, and it was *his* light ... that eventually brought her to the end of herself! And that's always where God is! God did a wonderful work in her life ... and now they've been married for 45 years...

It's important, folks, that we *show up* in people's lives ... *as disciples* of Jesus ... because when we do, we will be—as Jesus has already said—salt to preserve ... and light to lead the way...

Here me clearly today: Don't settle for 'Christian'. Instead, let's be the salt of the earth ... and the light of the world. Don't settle for 'Christian'. Instead, let's live out our Christian values in such a way that it might even irritate people at times ... *for the Glory of God*, of course!

It's just irritating, isn't it? Being salt is irritating (like rubbing salt in a wound—though healing, too); being light is irritating. But when we're salt & light ... out of love, *God can use that*. Are we loving others in this way?