

How to renew your world!

Living the New Life:

Matthew 5:11-16

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Bethany Church

Wesley J. Gabel

The world for a newborn may seem quite small. Apparently, our faces need to be around 18 inches away to interact with them. Although their world seems small, they affect a much greater world. Their coo warms a room. Their cries and hungers command industries. A single baby launches an unfathomable chain of consequences. Similarly, no matter how small we draw or define our world, it is far larger than our eyes can see.

At times, our world can be cruel. The first Christians faced tough circumstances. The Apostle Paul had fled many of their cities. When he revisited some returning from his mission, he sought to strengthen and encourage the believers. Paul and his companions told them:

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God... (Acts 14:22, NIV)

Hardships are not incidental to our walk as believers. They are not optional.

Jesus spoke of hardships when he began his Sermon on the Mount. He said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... (Matthew 5:3-6, NIV)

Think for a moment. Do the poor in spirit feel weak or strong? Do those who mourn feel energetic? Do the meek brim with confidence? Do those who thirst for righteousness already possess it? Jesus wanted his listeners to know that they weren't just poor, they weren't just mourning, they weren't just meek, and they weren't just hungry. Something beyond their vision

of themselves affected their condition. Their true condition was not the summation of the visible circumstances. Instead, God was doing something amazing in their world.

When Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue, he opened the scroll to Isaiah 61 and read:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners... (Isaiah 61:1, NIV)

The prophecy continued:

...to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor..., to comfort all who mourn... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. (Isaiah 61:2-4, NIV)

No one in that synagogue understood what they heard. They saw Jesus, the son of a carpenter and peasant woman. He was a normal looking man with normal looking brothers and sisters, who normally acted normal. However, Jesus was and is God's anointed one. In him and through him we are comforted. In him and through him we are crowned. In him and through him we are anointed and clothed for joy. We become his grove, God's planting to renew the world around us. We become a work of God that shows God's goodness and greatness. Through our own hands things are rebuilt, places are restored and people are renewed. Jesus wanted his followers to know that they are blessed even when they are mocked, persecuted and lied about. Jesus reminded his followers that the ancient prophets suffered similarly.

I think of Martin Luther King Jr. He did not see the end of his work. In no way was he perfect. He had weaknesses – some which I find appalling. However, he knew his identity, and he walked in faith despite opposition within and without. God took his voice, his feet and his

hands and rebuilt the moral vision of a nation. Through his faith God restored justice to a landscape of bigotry. Through his life God renewed the identity and dignity of both black and white Americans.

Do you see more than the tough circumstances around you? Do you see Jesus' cross where you are forgiven? Do you see his Spirit anointing you? Do you see God planting you with others here? Do you know your true condition? Do you know your call?

You have a call. Jesus called his followers the salt of the earth. The purpose of salt is to make food attractive. Jesus said that if salt loses its savor, it is worthless. Therefore, Jesus' followers make the earth savory and attractive to whom? We salt the earth to attract God. In the Bible, people suffered judgment as they defiled their bodies and their land. God handed them over to their sin, and abandoned them to its consequences, including domination by their enemies. All life depends on the presence and favor of God. As salt, unless we lose our distinctiveness, we make the earth attractive to God's presence and blessing. Your call is to be that savor so that God draws near and blesses what he in judgment has abandoned.

Jesus also called his followers the light of the world. He said that we are like a city on a hill, shining in the night for all to see. That is a powerful sign of hope because a city was something like the Green Zone in Iraq. It was an area cordoned off and protected from the savagery that erratically befell the countryside. In Jesus' day, thieves, raiders, wild beasts and nature all could prove deadly in the country. People saw cities as a refuge from danger. Their walls offered protection and their commerce, provision. The lights of a city brought hope.

In an atmosphere darkened with confusion, fear, despair and pain, where is the hope? Christ calls his followers to sew in those circumstances deeds of love, faith and hope that reveal the presence of God. We are not merely called to good works. We are called to attitudes and

actions that sew faith, hope and love where they are in short supply. Perhaps, the Apostle Paul reflected exactly on this when he wrote the Philippians from prison:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life. (Philippians 2:14-16, NASU)

Apparently, we are not solo candles although sometimes we must act alone. We are called to be a city of lights. We are not to acquiesce to the present atmosphere of a crooked and perverse generation. We are called to a web of relationships where together we sew faith, hope and love. We are not to grumble, complain and argue. We are not to repeat gossip or voice slander, whether it is a prayer request or a thirst for justice. We are to act with a view to redemption, reconciliation, and renewal because that is our call. God renews the world through us as we act in faith and love.

Renewal follows as we know our condition, our call and our Christ. Jesus was anointed to bring renewal, and he anoints us to bring renewal to our world. Christ's Spirit works in our repentance and faith. God breathes new life in us and through us as we act in faith and love. Don't worry about the atmosphere. Don't concern yourself with darkness. Don't fixate on the ruins of something that once was great. Instead, focus on Christ and his calling for you right now. Know that you are God's priest wherever you are located, an agent of God's redemption and renewal. Know that God's presence brings the blessing that every person needs. Embrace the promises of confession, repentance, forgiveness, obedience and intercession. Seek God's counsel and live in humility, obedience and fellowship with believers. Through living your new life in Christ, step by step, you become with others both the salt that attracts God's presence and the light that reveals it. Ruins are rebuilt! Places are restored, and people are renewed.