

A City on a Hill

Matthew 5:13-16

As we celebrate 40 years this morning, the newest edition of *Yankee Magazine* came out this week celebrating its 80th anniversary.¹ And they did so by describing 80 gifts New England gave to America. From Revolutionary trailblazers like Sam Adams and James Otis; to scenic marvels like Jenne Farm, Crawford Notch, the Kancamagus Highway; to world-changing innovations like chemotherapy, chocolate chip cookies, the board game, the microwave (invented at Raytheon, where some of you work), the Frisbee; to literary giants like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, E.B. White, Robert Frost, John Updike, Dr. Seuss, Stephen King.

Noticeably absent from *Yankee*'s list however, were the spiritual contributions this region has made to America, and to the world. From the first Great Awakening and the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield; to the Haystack revival and pioneer missionaries like Anne and Adoniram Judson; and other influential figures like David Brainerd, D.L. Moody, Elisabeth Elliot. In fact, the first governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, in a sermon detailing what he saw as a covenant relationship between the settlers in Massachusetts and God, famously said of New England, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."²

And there is a sense in which that has been true. New England has long been a pacesetter in so many ways. Education, scientific research, medicine, engineering and technology, literature, politics. But not so much religion these days, unless we're talking about the decline of religion, in which case, yes, it is very much a pacesetter. The land of the Great Awakenings is now one of the least religious regions in America. It's not uncommon to drive by old churches turned into business suites or condominiums, or simply abandoned. Which makes us ask, what happened to Winthrop's vision?

There's a sense in which Winthrop bit off more than he could chew. He wanted to realize through the state the particular and unique mission Christ gave to the church. It was a project destined for failure. But what of the *church's* stewardship of that mission? And more specific to our purpose today, *what of Westgate's place in that vision?* What will our gift, our contribution be—to Christ, to our community, our country, and to the nations? God has both blessed and used Westgate in many ways over the past 40 years. But what will the next 40, or 80, or 120, or however long the Lord tarries—what will that look like? *We cannot presume that because God has used us in the past, we will remain faithful in the future.* Most of the historic churches in New England started on solid ground. Of those that still exist today, most have an occupied pulpit that has been emptied of the gospel.

¹ *Yankee Magazine*, 80th Anniversary Issue, September/October 2015.

² John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," 1630. Available at: http://winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php.

What will it take for us—the congregation known as Westgate Church—to be faithful to our call and effective in our mission, here in New England and to the ends of the earth, for generations to come? The answer is quite simple: depending on the gospel of Jesus. *The gospel will keep us faithful, and the gospel will make us effective.* And we'll see that this morning in the passage that inspired Winthrop and has inspired so many of Christ's followers—Matthew 5:13-16 from the Sermon on the Mount.

The Portrait and the Purpose: Displaying the Beauty of Christ

The Sermon on the Mount is a collection of Jesus' teaching on what life looks like as part of God's Kingdom, under Jesus' authority. It stretches from Matthew 5–7, but we're jumping into a section that comes just after the famous Beatitudes at the beginning of ch. 5. The Beatitudes outline the *blessings* of life in God's kingdom, under God's reign. "*Blessed* are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3). They're not so much a *how-to manual*, but more like a *family portrait*. Jesus shows us a picture. 'This is what life looks like when you're part of my family, when you belong to my kingdom, when you live under my reign. This is what true joy and comfort and blessing look like—the kind that are able to withstand the pain and sorrow of life in a fallen world.'

It looks like poverty of spirit, a brokenness that mourns over sin and knows our need for Jesus. It looks like meekness that trusts God to be in control, yet hungers and thirsts for all to be made right. It looks like mercy and purity of heart, not being divided or diluted by the world. It looks like peacemaking, just as God offers peace to us through Jesus. And, because living under God's reign means our allegiance is to Jesus as King, and not primarily to the powers here around us, it looks like persecution, when the world doesn't want Jesus or his authority, or anything related to him. These are the kinds of people to whom God's kingdom belongs. This is the family portrait.

But there are two ways to treat a family picture in your home. One is to treat it as a memory to be held onto and locked away. We keep it on our computer or on a CD, or print it on a 4x6 piece of paper and keep it in a photo album under the coffee table, or in a scrapbook in the closet, or maybe a box or a drawer. Every now and then we pull it out and smile as we remember that time, maybe laugh at what we were wearing. And then eventually we put it away and go on again with life. That picture exists just for us and our personal nostalgia.

And then there's the kind of family portrait that gets printed on a 20x30 canvas, with a handsome frame, and hung in some prominent place in the house, over the fireplace, or maybe in the dining room. That picture is not just for personal nostalgia—that portrait is displayed for all to see. It's a celebration of your family and what they look like, for others to see and enjoy and admire.

When we come to vv. 13-16, we see that that's the purpose of the family portrait here in the Sermon on the Mount. It's not just a personal checklist of how I'm doing with God, or a private reminder of how blessed we are to have Jesus. It's a picture that God wants to put on display for the whole world to see, a display of his beauty. And so he says to his followers in Matthew 5:14: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."

We have a mission as Jesus' church: to display the beauty of Christ to the world. God is light, Scripture tells us (1 John 1:5; Ps. 18:12; 1 Tim. 6:16). But he wants to shine his light through his

people. Even ancient Israel was called to be “a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out . . . from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isa. 42:6-7). The problem was that they became blind themselves (Isa. 42:19). And so Jesus, as God in the flesh, and as True Israel, came, John 1 tells us, as “the true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:9).

Now, the metaphor of light suggests something about the world around us—that it is living in darkness. Which sounds a bit presumptuous. Today the church is often the one accused of living in the “Dark Ages,” on the wrong side of history. The world today has descended from the “Enlightenment”; we’ve grown up. Think of the incredible advances in modern medicine and technology, of moral philosophy and social theory. And yet the clear assessment of Scripture is that apart from Christ, for all its advances, this world remains in spiritual darkness. There is a cloud covering it, blinding us to the world as it really is, where God reigns over it through his Son, Jesus, who is Savior to all who seek refuge in him, and judge to all who continue in rebellion (Ps. 2:10-12). There is a spiritual darkness that comes from what the Bible calls sin, disobedience to God.

Jesus came *as light* to chase away this darkness. He came to deal with our sin—to live a life of faithfulness before his Father, in our place. To show us what life is supposed to look like before God, how the world is supposed to work in righteousness and holiness, in love and sacrifice and grace. He came to take our sin and rebellion on himself on the cross, that we might be forgiven for our sin, and through his resurrection, to give new life to those who take refuge in him as Savior and King.

And this same king, who says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world,” tells his followers in Matthew 5, “You are the light of the world.” It is through his people that Jesus now shines his light. Our mission is to show the world what Jesus is like. We are a “city on a hill that cannot be hidden.” Therefore, Jesus says in v. 16, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory [not to you, but] to your Father who is in heaven” (5:16).

But how can we be sure that the light we’re shining, the light that others are seeing, is the light of Jesus, and not our own light, or something else? How can we be sure it’s not diluted or obstructed—that nothing gets in the way? How can we remain faithful to our call and effective in our mission, here in New England and to the ends of the earth, for generations to come?

Four Threats to Our Faithfulness and Effectiveness

There are four temptations I want to talk about in terms of either replacing or obstructing our light. Four things that threaten both our faithfulness to God and our effectiveness in mission—the solution to which is the same in all cases: we must depend on the gospel of Jesus.

1. Self-Dependence

The first temptation is *self-dependence*—to think that what we have to offer to the world is really us, instead of Christ.

In celebrating our anniversary, it’s easy to look back at the last 40 years in terms of what we have accomplished, what we have done. Our hard work, our generosity, our sound doctrine, our

commitment. And it's easy to think about the next 40 in terms of what we will do for God—our passion, our creativity, our programs, our campaigns, our resolve to change the world for Jesus.

The Christian life is not a passive experience; we are called to follow and obey. But there is nothing that qualifies us for ministry apart from what Christ has done for us and in us; and there is nothing we have to offer to the world apart from what Christ can do for them. It is the gospel of Jesus—his work, his grace, his Spirit—that equips us and sanctifies us to be useful to God.

One of the most common things Jesus fought against throughout Matthew's Gospel was self-righteousness. The temptation to think that we have it all together, that we've got it figured out, that as long as we go through the motions on the surface, do the right religious thing, God will approve of us and accept us because of our performance for him. It's the kind of empty religiosity that was common among the Jewish leaders like the Pharisees and Scribes. But Jesus says "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Not in the sense that we have to one-up their hypocrisy, but in the sense that the kind of righteousness God desires is not something painted onto the surface, but something that comes from the heart—a heart that has been changed by the gospel of Jesus. In terms of the Sermon on the Mount, what keeps us shining the light of Jesus and not us is holding onto the first beatitude, Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit," the poor in *self*.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that poverty of spirit "means a complete absence of pride, a complete absence of self-assurance and of self-reliance. It means a consciousness that we are nothing in the presence of God."³ Sinclair Ferguson says "They are the bankrupt of this world, who know themselves to be so, and who therefore trust in the Lord as their only hope of protection and deliverance."⁴ Only when you are poor in spirit can you be rich in Jesus Christ. Only when you stop treasuring what you have and what you are and all you've done or plan to do, are you able to treasure Jesus and offer him to the world. We are the light of the world, but the light we shine is not our own greatness and glory, but that of Christ through us. Our light is reflective, as the moon reflects the sun. Only when we're honest about our sin and weakness, and utterly dependent on the sufficiency of God's grace through Christ, will we remain faithful to our call.

The sober reality is that God doesn't need Westgate. But I sure am glad he loves us and uses us.

2. Separation

The second temptation is *separation*—to disengage from the world for fear of persecution. It's getting harder and harder to be a faithful Christian in America today. Now compared to other parts of the world, we are ridiculously blessed with the level of religious freedom we enjoy. But that is slowly eroding away. To identify ourselves as an evangelical church—as a church that takes the gospel seriously—is to risk being insulted, marginalized, labelled as judgmental, fundamentalist, hypocritical, bigoted. *Which opposition is to be expected*—as Jesus said at the end of the beatitudes: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12). But we're not

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 50.

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 15.

sure we want that. And so instead of letting our light shine, we're tempted to go incognito with our Christianity. To keep to ourselves and fly under radar. We're just going to do our thing over here in the corner of Weston.

But that would be to forfeit the mission God has given us. It defeats the whole purpose of light. As Jesus says in v. 15, people don't "light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house." You don't turn the flashlight on when you're camping, but leave it in the backpack. You take it out. That's what it's for. To try to hide the family portrait in the closet when guests come over is to defeat the purpose of the family portrait.

We have been entrusted with the gospel of Jesus; we will only be effective if we trust Christ enough to let him shine, even if it means opposition. How else will the neighborhood know? Your friends or family or coworkers? How will they know if they never see the picture, if they never experience the beauty of Jesus through what you say and how you serve?

3. *Syncretism*

The third temptation we face in our mission is *syncretism*. Rather than disengaging from the world, we try to reach the world by becoming like the world. This is what Jesus warns against in v. 13: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

What does it mean that we are "the *salt* of the earth"? There are a number of uses that salt had in the ancient world—a preservative, seasoning, and so on. One commentator lists 11 different possibilities for what Jesus could be talking about here.⁵ But I think he tells us what he's talking about, because his concern is over the salt losing its "taste," "flavor."⁶

Every now and then I'll pick up a few cans of soup at the store to keep in my office for a quick lunch. About a year or so ago I decided that I would try and be healthy—I bought a version that was labeled "50% less sodium." I nearly dumped it down the drain. It was disgusting. Had I not been able to retrieve a salt shaker from the kitchen basement, lunch would have been a wash. It's the salt that gives soup flavor.⁷ So when that's watered down or diluted, it loses its flavor. And that's the picture here. The church loses its unique flavor—its unique contribution to the world—when it becomes diluted *by* the world.

One of the frequent charges against Christianity today is that it's irrelevant. It's outdated. It doesn't connect with where people are really living. They don't see why they need it. Which then results in all sorts of pressure on the church to become more "relevant," more "attractive" to the lost. Sinclair Ferguson has put it more sharply, "At times we fall into the trap of being

⁵ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC, 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), 1:72-73.

⁶ μωραίνω: "to become tasteless or flavorless," BDAG 663.

⁷ This soup analogy was inspired by Doug O'Donnell, *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013; pre-published manuscript), 83-84.

blackmailed by a world that says, ‘Unless I find your life attractive *on my own terms*, I will not respond to the message of the gospel.’⁸

And so we try to give them what they want, what will bring them in—this program or that trend—so that we can then sneak into it what they really need. The problem is that *you win them to what you win them with*. You win them to what you win them with.

If in effort to win the world, we simply become like the world—whether by feeding consumerism, or watering down our morality so that we can be less boring and more cool—then we have not won them to Jesus. We’ve won them to a baptized version of what they already have, which is as useless as soup without the salt. It’s garbage; it does them no good. If we give up the one unique thing we have to offer the world—the gospel of Jesus—in our attempt to win the world, we actually become irrelevant. We have lost our saltiness. And whatever else we’re offering, someone else probably does it a lot better.

You win them to what you win them with. How are we going to be effective? We must continue to be a people of the Word, taking this book seriously. We must continue to be a people of prayer, taking God seriously. We must win them to Jesus *with* Jesus. The light we shine is not the light of financial security, or well-adjusted children, or successful careers, though the gospel speaks to all of these. Our light is not a new kind of Christianity that’s not quite as boring or out of touch with what the world thinks. The light we shine is *Jesus*. Nothing more, nothing else than Jesus, and difference he makes in our lives.

4. Secondary Things

There is one more temptation we can easily fall into in terms of compromising faithfulness and effectiveness in our call: *secondary things*. The temptation to hold onto certain secondary things so tightly that they actually block the light of the main thing, Jesus, whom we’re trying to shine.

Whenever any people seek to live out the truth of the gospel, the Christian faith, they do so within a particular cultural context. For instance, here at Westgate we speak English. We meet in a relatively traditional New England church building, and have our worship services on Sunday mornings. We use particular instruments when we sing, and have a relatively regular order to our service. We have several different kinds of ministries as part of this church, some of which happen here in the building, others in our homes or local restaurants. None of those are bad things. But none of them are essential to the gospel of Jesus.

But when some of those secondary things become primary to us, when a church begins to hold tightly to certain cultural forms, but those forms happen to be *obstacles* to our mission rather than assets, we can begin to block the light of Jesus. Maybe it’s because the way we do things is so foreign to our mission field that it doesn’t connect, or so distracting that when they look at us, all they can see is that form, rather than Jesus.

If we are to remain faithful to our call and minister effectively for the next 40, 80, or 120 years, we have to be willing to change. That’s hard for some of us. I’m not talking about changing our message. We’re not changing our hope or the heart of our mission. But a willingness to change

⁸ Ferguson, 61.

the way we do some secondary, non-gospel things, so as not to block the light of the main thing, the gospel of Christ.

One of the things the elders and other church leaders have been discussing is changing the way we approach our non-Sunday morning ministries—what we do when we're scattered across the Metrowest. There are several challenges we're going to face as we seek to serve Christ in the years ahead. Some of them are cultural; some of them are spiritual. We are broken people in a broken world who have a motivated enemy.

But one of the unique challenges we face at Westgate is logistical. We are, as a congregation, *very* spread out. I want to show you a picture.

This is Westgate Church:

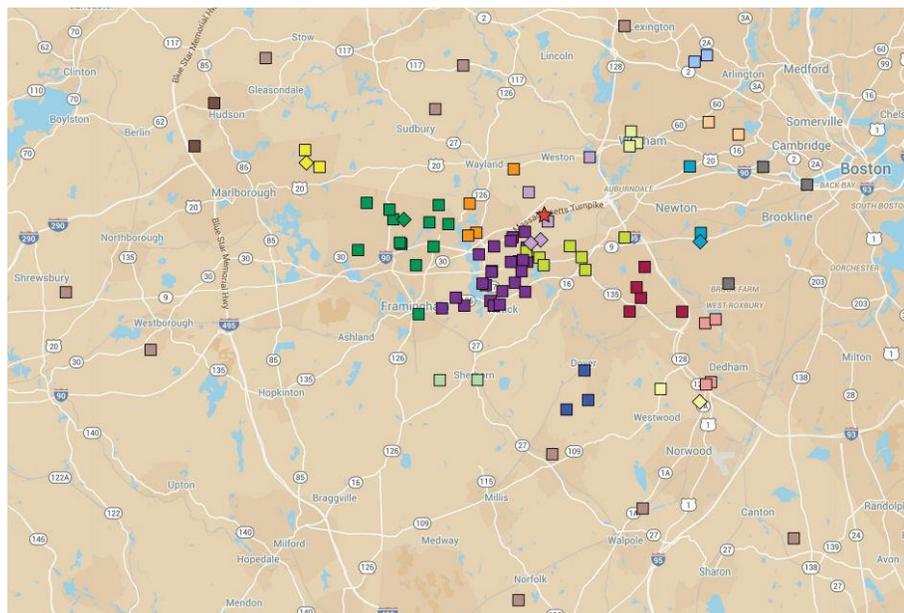
- 115 households
- 30 towns
- An area approx. 45 miles wide and 35 miles high

That's not a bad thing. But it does create a challenge when it comes to living out the vision God has given us—to be a gospel centered community living each day on mission for Christ. Distance makes it

hard to share life in community, especially when you factor in busy suburban lives. Distance makes close relationships harder to cultivate. It creates inconsistent attendance in our home groups. And this effects discipleship, care, outreach, and shepherd oversight.

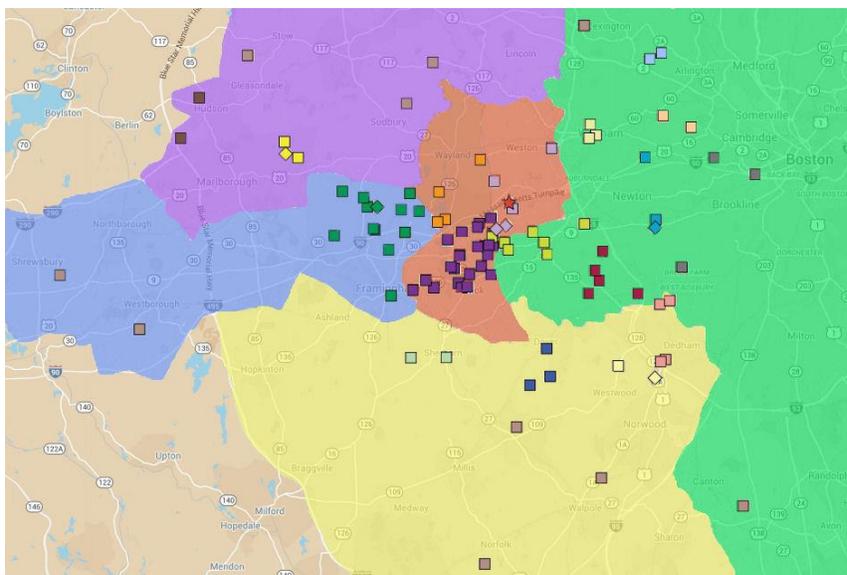
Being so spread out also creates a challenge for mission. Who exactly are we trying to reach with the gospel? If you aim at everything, you hit nothing. And if we target one specific town as a church, it's hard to create buy-in for people living in other towns farther away. Not because they don't love Jesus, but because they don't live there or have natural occasion to be there. And if our mission requires getting people to our building for gospel ministry to happen, many of us are at a severe disadvantage.

So what we're trying to do is stop and ask, what does Westgate Church *really* look like in terms of where we live and work and spend most of our time when we're not gathered here, and then to build our midweek ministries and relationships and shepherd care and discipleship and outreach around the reality of where we actually live and work.



To do this, we want to begin thinking about Westgate in terms of five regions, and begin cultivating an identity and partnership among our people living in those regions.

- **Central:** Natick, Weston, Wayland
- **East:** Wellesley, Needham, Newton, Waltham, Watertown, Belmont, Arlington, Lexington, Walpole, Brighton, Boston, South Hamilton
- **South:** Dover, Sherborn, Westwood, Dedham, Norfolk, Medfield, Stoughton
- **West:** Framingham, Shrewsbury, Westborough
- **Northwest:** Marlborough, Sudbury, Stow, Hudson, Concord



We're still dreaming and developing what this will look like. But we know that we will organize the shepherd care of our elders according to regions, and begin to build our home groups according to region. And we know that we want to build relationships in each region through quarterly region-wide activities, and work together in each region to bless our neighbors and reach out for Christ.

So I invite you to pray with us, as we seek to make the most of what we do for the sake of the gospel, whether we're gathering here for worship and discipleship, or scattering throughout the Metrowest. We want to shine the light of Christ to everyone around.

And when the world sees Jesus in his church, it has to respond. The world cannot remain indifferent before a church flavored by the gospel. If they are, then we have to ask whether we've lost our flavor, or are covering our light. And when they see Jesus in us, they will respond in one of two ways: persecution toward us, or praise toward God. The light of Christ will either make us a beacon or a target. We know the latter can happen, but we pray for more and more of the former. We want what Jesus talks about in v. 16: "that they may see your good deeds *and praise your Father in heaven.*" We want people to see Jesus in our lives, to hear Jesus on our lips, to see that there is a solution for our sin and brokenness, there is a God whose love is stronger than our sin, and who has stepped into his own creation to bring us to himself. We want them to give glory to our Father in heaven by coming to him in faith and repentance and joy and finding the life and love that he alone can give—the life and love they were made for. We want people to bring glory to God by following Jesus.

May we shine our light. May we never stop depending on the gospel, which alone can keep us faithful, and which alone will make us effective. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. If you dream about Westgate's contribution to Christ, our communities, and the nations over the next 40 years, what would you want those contributions to be?
2. What does it mean for the church to be "the light of the world"? How is possible to claim this as our calling without being arrogant or self-deceived?
3. The church is tempted to replace or obstruct our light in at least four ways: *self-dependence*, *separation*, *syncretism*, or *secondary things*. Of these four temptations, which one are you most prone to personally? Which one do you think Westgate is most prone to as a congregation?
4. In what specific ways are you prone to self-dependence? How does the gospel of Jesus help remedy this?
5. In terms of our public witness, what about interacting with the world gives you the greatest anxiety or fear? How does Christ encourage us in that fear?
6. As you observe the church in general today, in what ways are we trying to become like the world in effort to reach the world? How about you personally? What does the gospel have to say to this?
7. When you think about change in the church, what changes do you fear most? Of those changes, which ones are primary (i.e. matters of essential doctrine or practice), and which ones are secondary (i.e. matters of tradition or preference that are not essential to the gospel)? What secondary things at Westgate could be potential obstacles to the advance of the gospel today?