

Contrast – The Difference #2 – August 20, 2017

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**Here's** an old parable. There were ten bridesmaids, all waiting for the big event. That was actually their main job, to wait and to be prepared. Ten bridesmaids. Five were wise and five were foolish.

The wise ones were prepared. They had everything they needed. The foolish ones – well, they waited till the last minute to get their...eclipse glasses...and then it was too late!

This week has been a good illustration of how important it is to be ready. Ready for the big events of life. Most especially, ready for eternity, for the arrival of the bridegroom and the beginning of the wedding feast of the lamb.

This week has also provided a good illustration of what we talked about last week, our earthly treasures. I posted this on FB (thanks for the likes and comments). If you have yourself a fistful of eclipse glasses today, you could sell them all for a tidy profit. Maybe each pair is worth 10 or 20 today! But if you decide to stockpile them, to use them as your retirement savings, to set your heart on them, well by tomorrow night they will be worthless. Such are worldly goods. They DO have their usefulness, no doubt about it. But if they are all you've got, if THEY'VE got YOU, there will come a day when they won't buy you anything you really need – not love, not security, not meaning - nor especially the thing you need the most – your soul, your very salvation.

Well, that was last week's lesson. Today, we're all about...

Contrast. Black or white. Good or bad. Happy or sad. Young or old. Boy or girl. Summer or winter. Rich or poor. Thick or thin. Heavy or light. Far or near. Wet or dry. Orange...or crimson.

I could go on with the first-grade vocabulary words, but those are enough to introduce this lesson on contrast. What contrast? The contrast between people who believe and people who don't, between people who trust God and people who trust in themselves or in money or who trust no one. That's what this series is about – THE DIFFERENCE between people who live God's way and people who don't.

Notice that I don't say 'The difference between Christians and non-Christians'. Let's face it: Many of us wear the name of Christ but we build our lives on the shifting sand of worldly thinking. And notice that I don't say 'the difference between good people and bad people', because in a real sense there aren't any good people. Remember that time when someone called Jesus 'good teacher', and he said, 'Why do you call me good? There is only one who is good, and that is God alone' (**Mark 10:18**). Besides, let's get real honest and admit that the difference between one who trusts and obeys God and one who doesn't might be the difference between me today and me tomorrow.

Nevertheless, THE DIFFERENCE ought to show itself, be obvious, be our witness to the world that Christ makes a difference. And in Matthew 5, 6 & 7, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out the difference clearly. I urge you to read it through, even memorize it, for the Sermon contains much of the ethical teachings of Jesus, the teachings about how to live THE DIFFERENCE.

Today we're going to talk about the difference in terms of showing the world some contrasts – especially, two contrasts Jesus used to describe his followers and our place in this world. We're going to talk about:

Light or dark. And salty or...not so salty.

**<sup>13</sup> “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.**

**<sup>14</sup> “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**

We’re going to talk today about letting our light shine in the darkness and also about being the salt of the earth, the salt that prevents it from decay and perhaps gives it some seasoning.

**Matthew 5** is mostly about The Difference, and it lays it out in terms of the contrast between people of light and people of darkness, or salty people and ‘unsalted’. Take for example anger and conflict, forgiveness and reconciliation. **Jesus says** this:

**<sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.**

When I was a kid, I used to read that passage and focus on the forbidden words. I had four brothers and didn’t want to call them anything that the Bible didn’t allow. So, ‘raca’. No problem there. Never used that one. ‘Fool’? Okay, that could be a problem, especially with Mr. T in the public eye as he was, but I can live without that word. There are plenty of others though.

But now I realize that the warning is against anger itself. There is a time for anger, but anger harbored, anger welcomed, anger cherished – that tends to stew and fester into ugly words and hateful actions and then into revenge, bodily harm, murder, even mass extermination.

Last weekend in Charlottesville at the white supremacist rally, a man was photographed giving a KKK gesture (often confused, coincidentally, with a Nazi salute). Nothing unusual about that at such a rally, but this guy was wearing a hat with the patch of the United States Army’s 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. Now I don’t know if he actually served. Anyone can wear the hat. But it is ironic that a guy would hang around with KKK and neo-Nazis while wearing that patch because the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne out of Ft. Bragg is in 2017 **celebrating** 100 years of its history of honor and bravery and sacrifice and heroism in fighting for freedom, right up to the present moment, but ESPECIALLY so in Europe in WW2 fighting the Nazis. The 82<sup>nd</sup> parachuted into Normandy, fought in Operation Market Garden and the Battle of the Bulge, and then rolled into Germany to help end the war. A member of the 82<sup>nd</sup> was the first Medal of Honor winner of WW2. The 82<sup>nd</sup> took 9,000 battle casualties in the war. Oh, and one other thing the guy in Charlottesville may not know is that the 82<sup>nd</sup> is racially integrated. Happened a while ago.

In fact, the day after that **rally**, these two young men died in Iraq while engaging the enemy. They are Army Spc. Allen Levi Stigler Jr. of Arlington, TX and Sgt. Roshain Brooks of Brooklyn. Guess what? They’re both 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne.

After the KKK guy's picture went viral, there was a strong response from people associated with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. The **official twitter account** of the 82<sup>nd</sup> tweeted: *Our WWII Airborne forefathers jumped into Europe to defeat Nazism. We know who we are. We know our legacy.*

One man **tweeted**: *My father served in the 82<sup>nd</sup>. In Normandy, they took down this flag. Proudest day of his life.*

And one other **person** said: *This is also what three US paratroopers look like. My mixed-race grandfather (right), CPL Edgar Goodwin 505/[@82ndABNDiv](#) jumped D-Day.*

Well, the reason I'm laying all this out for you is to illustrate the link Jesus makes between anger and murder, how small sins become big and also to show how we can oppose darkness with light. So someone is angry with their sister or brother, or with a neighbor or someone who lives across town. Doesn't seem too serious. But Jesus says that this small seed of sin can grow into a large and bitter harvest of hatred and lead to murder.

How does this Nazi cancer and this evil of white supremacy keep going? Well we've always been sinful and hateful and scared of others. Sin runs deep. That's why all of us need salvation, and it's why we all need to speak up and take action against evil when we see it. If we allow just a little of this stuff to go unchallenged, it can grow into something pretty evil. Maybe we have turned a blind-eye to this white-supremacy hogwash in the past, and as they say, all it takes for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing. But I was really proud of the people who spoke up publicly about this last week, especially the folks of the 82<sup>nd</sup>, who have all the credibility in the world to do so.

Well this is about our personal lives too, not just about national problems. So **Jesus gets personal**:

**<sup>23</sup> "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.**

If anger can fester into hatred and then violence, the way to kill it quickly is to repent, forgive and be reconciled. On the national and international level, forgiveness can be tricky, but most of us aren't responsible for that. What we are responsible for is our own relationships.

In light of what Jesus says here, I think it is a shame how often unresolved conflict tears apart Christian relationships. Long-time friends, both Christians, won't speak to one another. People serve in a church for years, claim to be family, and then they walk out because they're upset with someone. "I don't want to talk about it. I'm just gone". Brothers who grew up in the same house now barely speak to each other because of some offense.

What a dereliction of our duty(!) to obey Christ and show a CONTRAST with the rest of the world by our willingness to forgive and apologize and get over something and make amends and let a relationship heal. Walking out, giving up, cutting off contact – hey, anyone can do that! Everyone DOES that. Where is the DIFFERENCE in that?

I'm not making light of the offenses that might be weighing down on you, but the world wonders: If Christ doesn't have the power to help people get along, why should I bother with him?

We know that Christ DOES have that power. We need to realize that we have an obligation to let his power work in us to do what goes against our inclination, to apologize and forgive, so that the world might see he makes us different! And even though I call it an obligation, you can see that, once you do it, it becomes a great joy – to have your relationships healed, to not be angry or bitter or to feel like you have to avoid people? That’s a real CONTRAST to how most people live their lives. Let that be a contrast that shines forth in us.

Many of us think of ourselves as godly, spiritual, righteous because we come to church and offer our gifts to God. That’s important, but Jesus specifically says there is something more important, more spiritual, more religious (if you will): Leave your gifts at the altar, leave the worship service, drop the supposedly spiritual thing you are doing and go say you’re sorry! At least TRY to be reconciled. I know you can’t do it by yourself, but you can do your part. And that is a big part of THE DIFFERENCE.

Let’s look through some of the other things Jesus says in **Matthew 5** about THE DIFFERENCE, and I’ll just pass over these quickly today and probably touch on them later in the series. What he says about adultery is very similar in structure to what he says about **murder**.

**<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** Just as anger becomes the seed of murder, lust becomes the seed of adultery. It’s best to deal with both of them before they deal with you.

Then Jesus gives a radical-sounding **remedy**: **<sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.**

I think we have the good sense to not take this literally. No one in the NT gouged out their eyes or cut off a hand. But do we have the good sense to take it seriously? Wouldn’t it be awful to not take lust seriously and then let it lead you into unfaithfulness, the break-up of your family, estrangement from your kids, and perhaps you turning away from God himself? Better to take definitive action than to not take it seriously and let it grow and take over your life and then your soul.

It may not be easy to overcome an addiction to pornography, or to turn your back on unfaithfulness. But one of the contrasts between people who trust God and people who don’t is that those who trust him are willing to follow him down the hard road that leads to freedom and life.

And what about divorce? Divorce has become commonplace in our culture, even expected. I’m not interested in condemning anyone who has been divorced. But here is indeed another place to show THE DIFFERENCE. **Jesus said**: **<sup>31</sup> “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup> But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

In our church we believe that God loves divorced people. Maybe you were sinned against by an unfaithful partner and maybe you were the unfaithful partner, or maybe it wasn’t so simple. God loves you. All we are saying is that one contrast between us and people who don’t trust God is our willingness to work on our marriages, to repent, to forgive, to see the best in each other and to face problems with love.

Then, this, the most **dramatic** one:

<sup>38</sup> **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’<sup>[h]</sup> <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. <sup>41</sup> If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.**

<sup>43</sup> **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor<sup>[i]</sup> and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

This would be the sharpest contrast of all, if the world could see it consistently. Whether it’s the white supremacists (who always seem to claim a connection to Christianity) or people that cannot forgive and repent and get along or families breaking apart, husbands and wives growing to hate each other, unfaithfulness – hey, the world sees plenty of anger, hate, murderous rage. What if people not only forgave and tolerated but LOVED their enemies, prayed for their persecutors?

THAT is a contrast that the world needs to see. They can see it in us, if we let God make it happen.

**Tomorrow** at around 2:30p, our sun will be darkened. It’s only temporary (we think)! About 2 and a half minutes of totality, plus some uncanny half-light on either side. What a vivid illustration of how much we need the light! What a vivid illustration of how our unfaithfulness can block it. What a wonderful picture of how much the world needs to see the light of Christ, reflected in us – by the contrast, the **difference**.

<sup>14</sup> **“You are the light of the world. So: ...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**