

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

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The Special Mark of God

Matthew 5: 13-16; 7: 13-14

To the young people sitting before me, especially those of you who are graduating high school seniors, you deserve to know that throughout your formative years, your parents, your grandparents, your Sunday School teachers, your youth minister and your pastor have conspired to communicate to you a subliminal message, a message we have never expressly articulated to you or overtly admitted, but a subliminal message which, next to the words, "We love you," is perhaps the most important phrase you will ever hear from us.

The message we've been trying to communicate is this: *you bear the special mark of God.*

The imprint of God is upon your soul. The assurance of God has been granted you.

The mission of God has been planted within you. The authority of God's love shapes your being.

As long as you live with a sense of specialness, as long as you live with an awareness of God's special mark, your life will be shaped by participation in a cosmic drama, you will have access to an inner energy, and your life will be characterized by a measure of excitement and vitality that those around you will lack.

Our Lord sought to explain this special mark of God by the use of three images:

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

You are called out to tread a narrow, particular path that is yours and yours alone."

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

You are called to follow your own particular narrow path to find your way to fulfillment.

If you live with an open ear, you can hear the whispering Spirit calling you to become a new creature and to renew the world through the ceaseless renewing of yourselves.

If you listen to this whispering Spirit of God and live ever mindful of the Spirit of God's mark upon you, the power of God will flow naturally from the depths of your own being into the lives of others.

You know that ours is not a believing age. You know society tends to scoff at the reality of the spiritual, And we find ourselves leaping to the easy assumption that it was easier to believe in Christ, easier to love Christ and serve Christ in an earlier age. Do not believe this. Nothing could be further from the truth. Think of the early Christians. Arrayed all the way across the known world against their nascent message was the full imperial power of Rome.

Arrayed against them as they tried to communicate the Gospel of Christ in their own neighborhoods was the formidable wealth and wisdom of the Sadducees and Pharisees.

All popular prestige, all military might, all secular authority, all social approval lay in opposition to the Christian movement and its few ignorant peasants whose so-called Messiah had been crucified.

All Christianity had in its corner was a few unlettered fishermen and converted tax collectors.

Yet here is the remarkable truth that stands as part of your heritage as believers.

Those peasants, those fishermen, those tax collectors were so aware of the special mark of God upon their lives that they stood unbowed and undaunted before generals, Caesars, magistrates, judges and assemblies, because they knew that flowing within them was the Spirit of God able to turn the world upside down. You are marked with that same mark. You possess that same energy.

You can draw from the same assurance that you are called by God to turn the world upside down.

That is your mission -- to change the world as you live the values of the Christ!

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.
You are called to tread a narrow path in obedience to God's eternal call.

Of course, it is not easy to live with a sense of specialness.
It is not easy to remember that you bear the special mark of God within your soul.
You may well forget this sense of specialness as you move into your adult lives,
but if ever you do, I want you to remember my voice,
remember the voice of all you know who have loved and nurtured you.
Even when you forget that you are special before God, hear our voice reminding you, "You are!"
You bear God's special mark within your soul. Even when you don't see it, we do,
even though we admit that as mature believers we often forget that we bear the special mark of God, too.
Part of the role of any community of faith is reminding each other that we are marked by the divine.
Yet we call you to claim afresh God's claim upon your life, and in claiming God's claim upon you,
to pass on your faith heritage to the next generation that comes behind you.

Your greatness is not a greatness that rests on your own talent.
Your greatness is the greatness of God. Even so, it is a genuine greatness.
You can change people's lives with this greatness.
You are God's salt, and there is an element of bitterness to the taste of salt.
Salt is not sweet, or it wouldn't be salt.
The salt of God's Good News is bitter even to those of us who practice the Gospel.
There will be times when you want to lead lives that are selfish, marked by hatred, greed and pettiness.
Then the salty Word of God will come to you and say, "You are not allowed to live that way.
You bear my special mark. You are not allowed to live in accordance to your whims and wishes.
You are called instead to live in obedience to the mark of God upon you."
You may be just one grain of salt, but one grain of salt can make a tremendous difference.
One grain of salt can stand for purity amidst a milieu of crudity;
one grain of salt can stand for forgiveness amidst a spirit of vengeance;
one grain of salt can stand for clarity in a season of confusion;
one grain of salt can stand for courage in an atmosphere of fear;
one grain of salt can stand for apathy in a time of indifference.
You may be just one grain of salt, but you can make a difference.

Long before you were born, in my hometown of Montgomery, Alabama, in May of 1961,
a group of young seminary students, white and black, came riding into a Greyhound bus station.
They were known as Freedom Riders, and they were living as salt and light,
trying to say that the laws of public transportation in our country applied equally to all people.
They were about to pay a heavy price for being salt and light.
When they came into that bus station, awaiting them was an angry mob armed with bats and bricks,
and as those students left the bus, they were viciously attacked and endured a fearful beating.
Teeth were kicked out. Bones were broken. One of the students, a young man named John L. Lewis,
looked at the hatred in those people's eyes and said to himself, "I am going to die."
Suddenly, into that melee came one man, a man very different from those students,
a man wearing the uniform of an Alabama Public Safety officer, and he took his pistol and fired it in the air.
His name was Floyd Mann, and he announced loudly, "There will be no killing here today."
One attacker sought to ignore Mann's words and raised his bat to deliver a final crushing blow and
Floyd Mann pointed his gun at that man's head and said, "One more swing, and you are a dead man."
One man. One man who sensed that *he* was special,

who sensed that the *attacked* were special, that even the *attackers* were special and imprinted by God. One man living as salt changed the future of everyone in that bus station that tumultuous day. You will find that if the Gospel's salt can be a temporary bitterness to us, it is perpetually a piercing bitterness to a selfish world. In practicing God's salty Gospel you will find it a bitter judgment to you some days, but you will find that God's Gospel tastes far more bitter to a world that opts for hatred and violence.

Salt has a bitterness to it, to be sure. But salt also exercises the power to preserve from corruption. Salt has the power to preserve from decay. Salt can be used to battle the putrefaction that can slowly overtake a life. That may sound like abstruse, abstract language, but I promise you, you will see exactly what I mean. In your dorm rooms, on your halls, you will encounter people who choose to ignore the mark of God upon their lives, and in so doing will unleash circumstances of destruction that will overwhelm them. I promise you, throughout your college career, you will find people you love, respect and admire be overcome by circumstances of darkness, because they have run away from their mark of God. In response, you are called upon to shine your light. You are to shine your light in dark places, in dark lives. The Gospel will call you at times to shine your light when you might prefer to slide into the anonymity of the crowd. But you must respond to the call to live as God's light. Red Skelton, a comic before your time, said that a comedian is a warrior against gloom. A Christian is a warrior against gloom, too. Your weapons are love, faith, hope, peace, grace and truth.

Salt. Light. Treading the narrow way. How do these ideals translate into the living of ordinary existence? What are the allegiances that will orient your being? What will impel your daily living? I think of two guys laboring on a railroad line, hammering nails with sledgehammers. An extremely well-dressed man comes over to one laborer and shakes his hand and exchanges pleasantries with him for a few minutes before heading on his way. 'Who was that?' the one laborer asks the other. 'You don't know him?,' said the other, he's the president of the railroad.' 'Then how do you know him?' 'We started out hammering nails together twenty-five years ago.' 'Then how did he get to where he is, while you are still where you are?' 'Because,' said the man ruefully, 'twenty-five years ago I came to work for \$1.50 an hour. He came to work for the railroad.' What attitude will govern your approach to life? How will you invest your life? Will you live simply in pursuit of a paycheck a couple of times a month? Or will you live in such a way that your life is oriented about the values of the Kingdom of God? How will you be salt and light?

I came across a speech delivered by a highly-placed executive who was explaining to young MBAs about the characteristics they needed to look for as they hired their labor force. What do you think this executive suggested was the number one value that bosses should treasure? Creativity? Ambition? A brilliant intellect? No. He said the number one value that employers must look for in employees is *integrity*. He said, if you hire someone who does not have integrity, you had better hope they are lazy and stupid, too. Someone who is energetic, efficient *and* dishonest will ruin you. He said, our organization grades people on a two-dimension grid. One, do they get things done? Second, do they achieve results in accordance with our values? He noted, those people who get results and do so in accordance with our values, we treasure them.

We promote them. We pay them well. We cherish them. They are just what we are looking for. Those who don't achieve results, but they operate in accordance with our values, we give these people repeated second, third and fourth chances, because if their values are right, we know that over time, with the right training, with the right opportunity, they can achieve their potential. But those who get things done yet do not share our organization's values, we seek to get rid of quickly, for over time we know they will surely destroy our organization. Integrity. Living as salt and light will transform any organization of which you are a part for the better.

Our Lord says to us plainly, "The way is narrow and the way is hard that leads to a positive life." Those words may sound harsh upon your ears but there is great truth within them. Think about something: up to now, you have all traveled pretty much the same path -- kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school. Now you must begin the process of choosing the narrow way that defines your life. Now you are going to start making decisions that will carve out the course of your existence. You will be called upon to make decisions of vocation, decisions of education, decisions of love and relationships, decisions on how you will invest your talent. Each of these decisions will carve out for you the nature of your singular life. The prayer that you must pray with great frequency is, "Lord, am I on the right path? Show me the best way." And as the Lord answers that prayer, you must follow that path with courage and integrity.

Thirty-seven years after John Lewis was in that Greyhound station, he returned to Alabama to help dedicate a civil rights memorial. He had enjoyed a long and distinguished life. In fact, when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream," speech in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., John Lewis was a speaker who spoke right before him. Him and Charlton Heston. John Lewis came back to Alabama thirty-seven years later as a congressman from the state of Georgia. An old white man came up to him and said, "I remember you from the Freedom Rides. You are John Lewis, aren't you?" John Lewis had no idea who this man might be. Suddenly the light dawned, and he realized who stood before him. Floyd Mann. Overcome with emotion, the black man embraced the white man and began to cry, saying, "You saved my life." Floyd Mann embraced John Lewis back and pronounced this benediction: "I am right proud of your career."

My young friends, your adult lives and careers are just commencing. As you know, circumstances are about to push my life and yours far apart, but know this: I will continue to pray that you claim the special mark of God upon you. I will continue to pray that you live as salt and that you live as light and that you carve out your own particular narrow way. It will be my hope and prayer that some day down the way, you might feel an aged hand on your shoulder and that you might look into my face so I can say to you in sincerity and love, "I am right proud of your careers." Go with God and make it so. Congratulations.

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June 7, 2009, High School Senior Recognition Sunday