

# The Things We Don't Have To Do

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It was last Christmas Eve during the day a few hours before the Christmas Eve services that there was a hospital call for me to make in a neighboring town. When I was through visiting and on my way home I stopped by the local Starbucks drive-thru (something I so seldom do) to pick up a cup of coffee. I waited in the car line, placed my order, but when I got to the window – the Starbucks lady told me that my drink was free. Free, I said. How does that work? Oh, she said, the guy ahead of you bought it for you and said to say, “Merry Christmas.” We were pretty far from home, so I was pretty certain that my treat came from a stranger. Somebody unbeknownst to me. A little treat I could never pay back. Clearly something this stranger did not have to do. There would be no credit given, no thank you note in the mail. So of course we kept the string going, paying it forward, and the lady behind me got herself a little Christmas gift too. Lord, knows how long it continued. It was a nice moment.

A few minutes later I had one more stop to make on my way home and this was at a local drugstore. When I had made my purchases and was back in my car and exiting the parking lot there were two lines of cars merging into the one parking lot exit. It was a busy shopping day, of course. Nevertheless, each was taking their turn merging into the one line with the exception of the woman in the other line commensurate with me. The car ahead of her took his turn and so it was my turn to file in, but for whatever reason she was not going to let that happen. Hugging the bumper of the guy before her and without even giving me a glance, she jumped the line. Interesting, I thought. She

must be in quite a hurry on this busy shopping day. And so imagine my surprise when I finally got behind her and saw the bumper sticker on her back bumper that said, "Jesus is the reason for the season."

The juxtaposed experiences on Christmas Eve of all days, gave me some pause and obviously has stuck in my mind ever since. And I guess it is this "stuck in my mind" part that has me wondering about the impression you and I make in the things we choose to do and the things we choose not to do. There are a lot of things we have to do in this world – pay your taxes, be good to your children, cut your lawn, change your oil, take no more than ten things to the express checkout line in the supermarket. Lots of things we have to do. But what about the things we don't have to do? The things that nobody expects. The surprise gestures of grace. The unusual kindnesses that a calculated world has learned not to count on. The free coffee from the guy in front of you. If Jesus is the reason for the season, then what does that mean about the things we do that we have to do and the things we do that we don't have to do?

It makes me wonder if that isn't what Jesus was trying to say when he said in the Sermon on the Mount: "You know, you are the salt of the earth." You are the salt of the earth. You are the ones who can bring flavor to the world. Whatever you do and however you do it – it really matters. You are the salt of the earth, and when salt is in the mix, everybody notices it.

It reminds me of the story when on a certain Thanksgiving when I was young my mother had just returned home from having surgery and was recuperating. It was left to me and my father to cook the Thanksgiving dinner for our family and some invited friends. This was of course the first mistake. My father doled out assignments and I was given the task of making the mash potatoes. Which translated for me was, Go out and buy a box of Hungry Jack's Instant mash potatoes. So I did and I duly followed the instructions on the back, whipped up a batch of something that looked like mash potatoes and placed it proudly on the table. Once grace was said, the first person that took a bite promptly spit them back onto their plate. As did the second person and the third person. This was not a good sign. I learned this on the Food Channel, when people spit what you've cooked

back onto their plates; it's not a good sign. Turns out that in my careful study of the directions what I thought said tablespoon of salt, said teaspoon of salt. Boy what a difference a little salt makes!!!!

So Jesus said, You are the salt of the earth and when salt is in the mix everybody notices it. Whatever you do, and however you do it, matters.

So it is not much further into the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus gets more specific and says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. And while you are busy loving the people who you know are going to love you back, go ahead and love the ones that hate you too." And now all of a sudden Jesus is speaking of the salty life of doing the things that nobody expects you to do.

It's John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel who speaks about the salty life when he says, "If you've got two coats, share with the one who has none. If you've got food in your cupboard after dinner, give it to the one whose closet is empty." It is this salty life of doing the things that nobody expects you to do.

It reminds me of the story of the two farmers who were good friends and the one went off for the weekend to a Christian conference and he came back and his friend asked him about the conference. The farmer said, "I learned a lot about the Christian life." Really, said his friend. What did you learn? He said, Well, it kind of goes like this – if you had two tractors and you knew I had none – would you give me one of your tractors? Well, of course, his friend said. If had two tractors I'd give you one. He said, "And if you had two hay wagons and you knew I had none, would you give me one of your hay wagons? His friend said, Well yes, if I had two hay wagons I'd give you one. And if you had two cows and you knew I had none, would you give me one of your cows? "Dog gone, Charlie," said his friend, "that's not fair, you know I have two cows!"

Life gets salty when we do the things we don't have to do.

Almost sixty years ago a little girl by the name of Joan Lancaster, who lived here in Sarasota on Bayshore Rd. finished reading a children's story written by a quite famous English author named, you guessed it, C.S. Lewis. It was 1954. By that time Lewis had already been on the cover of Time magazine and his books made him an international phenomenon. When the little girl finished reading one of these children's book – called *The Chronicles of Narnia*. She decided that she was going to write this author a letter – wanting to learn more about the stories. With all childlike innocence she wrote her note, put it in an envelope along with a drawing and picture of herself and from her home here she sent it off. Imagine her surprise when a couple of weeks later in her mailbox a letter had arrived from Mr. Lewis. Handwritten, five paragraphs long. In part this is what Mr. Lewis wrote this young elementary age girl:

*Dear Joan Lancaster:*

*Thank you very much for your kind letter with beautiful painting and interesting photo which reached me today.*

*I am so glad you like the Narnian books, and it was nice of you to tell me. There are to be seven stories altogether ... The 7<sup>th</sup> is already written, but still only in pen-and-ink, and I have not quite decided yet what to call it. Sometimes I think of calling it The Last King of Narnia, and sometimes, Night Falls on Narnia. Which do you think sounds best?*

*I was at a zoo last week and saw the real lions: also some perfectly lovely bears nursing their cubs.*

*How lucky you are to have a pool.*

*With love to your brother and yourself.*

*Yours ever,*

*C.S. Lewis*

Imagine the thrill of that little Sarasota girl opening that mailbox and that envelope and reading those words. Wow! And of course no one would have faulted the famous author and speaker and lecturer for not taking the time out of his busy schedule to write a note to a young fan a couple thousand miles away. Clearly not something he had to do. Amazing though what a little salt will do.

Enough so that Joan Lancaster wrote him another note with more pictures asking more questions. And sure enough there came another response. And then she wrote another letter – to which came another response. This happened 26 times until just a few weeks before the author died. 26 times. The things you don't have to do! And little Joan Lancaster was just one of hundreds to whom Lewis wrote in the same way.

You are the salt of the earth. Whatever you do, and however you do it, can make a huge difference. Amazing what a tablespoon of salt will do.

When I was a little boy, the youngest of four sons, soon after my brother's diagnosis with severe mental handicaps my mother, to handle all the challenges, employed a woman to come be a mother's helper. Betty was a mother herself with nine children of her own. But to make ends meet she came into our home two days a week. She became in many ways a part of our family and made the four of us boys her boys too. After years of this we moved away. And as these things go we lost touch with Betty. So imagine my surprise when I got a call some forty years later from Betty's daughter saying that Betty was in her last few days but she couldn't go without calling her McConnell boys. So Betty got on the phone and said, "Stevie ... I just called to say, I love you. And there hasn't been a day when I didn't pray for you." Oh my gosh – talk about the things you don't deserve.

The things we don't have to do.

Carl Rowan the prize winning columnist of a couple decades ago spoke often of the influence in his life of a woman named Bessie Gwinn. Bessie Gwinn was a schoolteacher that Rowan had while growing up in McMinnsville, Tennessee. She was a teacher at Jim Crow High School there in McMinnsville and young Carl Rowan was her student. She taught Carl Shakespeare and Chaucer and Milton and the scriptures. She taught Carl about similes and metaphors and hyperbole. After graduating from high school and college Carl went on to become an accomplished journalist --- nominated one year for the Pulitzer Prize.

When Bessie, his teacher, turned eighty-five she was to be honored at a testimonial dinner by a group of her students and teachers and Carl was invited to come and say a few words. As fate would have it he had been invited also on the same night to attend a White House dinner hosted by then President Jimmy Carter. How often in a lifetime do you get invited to a White House dinner? Rowan sat down and wrote this letter in response to the President's invitation:

*Dear Mr. President: I received your letter three days after I had agreed to speak a few words at a dinner honoring the wonderful high school teacher who taught me to write. I know you will not miss me at your dinner but she might at hers. Sincerely yours, Carl Rowan.*

The things you don't have to do. The tablespoon of salt that will never be forgotten.

I know I may sound like a broken record when I say that you don't have to go far to be reminded that the world can be a pretty tough place. Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. And everybody is on their guard and everybody wants what's coming to them. And there always seems to be a fight over

what we really have to do for each other. Who owes who what? And the result is a dog eat dog world that can leave a lot of us rolling our eyes, smirking, and saying, "Whatever".

But then I walk into the Campus Center on a Tuesday afternoon and see tables and tables of adults side by side with kids who need a little help with their school work – and I look at these volunteering adults and say, "You know, you don't have to do this." And then I poke my head into the Food Pantry and see volunteers graciously packing and handing out bags of food to people down on their luck – and I say you don't have to do this. And then I stop over at Booker Elementary and see volunteers taking classrooms of kids under their wings and I say, You don't have to do this. I see ministry teams gathered for meetings, I see Sunday School teachers teaching, I see sweating people tending the grounds, I see strangers helping strangers to their cars, I see offering envelopes going into the plate from people who barely have enough to pay the rent, I see missionaries going to Central America, I see advisors hanging out with teenagers, I see and I see and I see ... and I say ... you don't have to do this.

And of course we don't. And of course we do.

For we are, Jesus says, the salt of the earth.