

Salt And Light

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 March 2026

Preacher: Mark Fleming

[0 : 00] Well, it's a joy to be with you this morning. I was speaking in another Free Church of Scotland last Sunday, all the way down in Campbelltown.

So it's been quite the journey at the West Coast to be here. It's actually my son-in-law, James Murray, who's the minister at Campbelltown Free Church. So I speak there about once a month and combine that with babysitting duties.

But it's a joy to be here with you today. I think I was here a couple of years ago and shared just very briefly five minutes about the work of Sports Chattelsea Scotland.

And I'm going to fill in the gaps a little bit this morning. So as well as unpacking God's Word, I'm going to do a little bit of church history with you as well. That sounds terribly boring, perhaps, but hopefully this won't be.

Really to give you an insight into the connection between the church and the world of sport across the UK. I want to actually start in England because that's a very interesting story.

[1 : 04] Prior to the Industrial Revolution, people would have largely lived in rural communities. And automatically, they would have been connected to their local parish church.

So they would have been baptized there. They would have automatically been a part of it. So there was a very strong connection in all the parishes between the people and the church. However, during the Industrial Revolution, loads of people moved into these burgeoning cities.

And as they did so, they lost connection with the church. Or it could be said, the church lost connection with them. And so while the cities were growing, the churches went.

So some churches began to realize, we need to reach out and connect with people because they're not simply going to come to us. We can't assume that. And some churches hit on the idea, why don't we start a football club?

And then what we could do is we could sign young men to play for a football club. But part of the criteria for playing is they come to church. They join Bible study. They come to evangelistic services.

[2 : 09] It's a really novel idea, and it worked really well. In fact, some of the biggest football clubs in England were started by evangelical churches. So ones you may be familiar with, Everton, Tottenham Hotspur, Queen's Park Rangers, Southampton, Barnsley, just a few to mention.

One of the ones I like, Aston Villa, because that was founded by a Methodist minister, but the president was actually a Scottish Christian called William MacGregor from Perthshire.

And the reason why he's really significant was, is that he was the instigator of the beginning of the first ever football league in the world, the English football league. So actually, when they talk about it coming home, it might be going there, but it was started by a Scot, so it's really ours.

It was our idea. Okay, but my favorite story of them all was actually of a minister's daughter whose father had moved into a really rough inner city area. And his daughter had noticed that there was a bunch of lads that were getting up to no good, drinking alcohol, getting into trouble, and so forth.

And she hit on the idea of corralling them together and teaching them how to play football. So she gathered them together, offered to coach them. They found a bit of waste ground, and she started to coach them, and they formed a football team, and they weren't bad.

[3 : 28] Today, they're called Manchester City. So one of the top football clubs in the world was started by a minister's daughter. So when you look at the connection between the church and football in England, you understand why, when it comes to the big showpiece final, the FA Cup final, they actually sang the hymn, Abide With Me, as a nod of respect to the church and of the church's influence in developing the game.

Now, that's England. Come north of the border, and the story's a wee bit different. If I tell you that only two football clubs in Scotland were started by a church, one being Glasgow Celtic, and the other being Hibernian from Edinburgh, you wouldn't have to be a church historian to know it wasn't the proddies that were involved in these ventures, because the attitude of the church, the Protestant Evangelical Church in Scotland, towards sport was quite different to England.

We would have seen sport as a spiritual distraction. We would have seen it as probably something sinful because it looks enjoyable, and that would have been the attitude. And so, when you were converted, you'd be more than likely expected to hang up your football boots, burn your shinty stick, have nothing to do with the world, you know, come out from among them, and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing, and don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

And this would have been the message that we would have heard, and certainly I, as a young believer, would have heard as well. And so, for me personally, when I got converted, I kind of took a step back from my love of football, my playing of it, and my interest in it.

But that eventually changed, and I started to go back to football, and the team that I grew up supporting is a team that you might be familiar with.

[5 : 19] They're called Glasgow Football Club, or the other name they have is Partick Thistle. That's the club that I grew up supporting as a result of my grandparents' influence. And I loved football, and I didn't really have an issue with going along to matches, and that's what I did.

But I became a minister in 1988, and I remember going to visit a retired deacon from the church. And at the end of my meeting with him, I was so relieved he was retired, because he did nothing but moan the whole time about everything about the church.

And one of the things he said, he says, oh, the church has gone to pot, he said. It's so worldly now. He says, I'll tell you how bad things I've got. I saw a deacon from the Baptist Kirk coming out of Love Street football ground.

How terrible is that, he said. And my response was, well, St Merton, nah, you're not likely to find me there. That's not my team. And he says, you don't go and watch football, do you? I said, well, I support Partick Thistle, so it's not quite at that level.

But I said, I enjoy the football. He was horrified. He said, how can you go to a football match and hear all that bad language as a Christian, let alone a pastor? I said, well, to be honest, I could walk down Paisley High Street and hear a whole lot worse.

[6 : 33] And the thing about it is, at Partick Thistle, there's not that many folk going just now, so I'm more likely to hear a dog barking in Maryhill Road than I am hearing somebody swear. Not really an issue.

Well, he was flabbergasted. He said to me, how would you feel then if you're sitting in that football ground and at half time, the Lord Jesus Christ returned and found you sitting there, how would you feel then?

I said, well, see, to be honest with you, we're not doing very well just now, so if Jesus returned at half time and got me out of there, it would be a blessing. Beam me up, Scotty. Anyway, he was not impressed and neither were most people when they found out that I had an interest within football. And yet, today, the picture is very different. Today, in Scotland, there are around 200 sports chaplains. Chaplains as far north-west as Ness, as far north-east as WIC, at WIC Academy Football Club, at Cate Ness Vikings Basketball Club, way down in the south-east, as far down south as Coldstream, and south-west as far down as Gretna.

And right through the whole country, there's been an incredible move of clubs, whether they be football, shinte, basketball, you name it, who have been asking, begging us, actually, if they can have a chaplain.

[7 : 56] What has happened? So, really, very briefly, what I can tell you is that back in 1998, I got the opportunity of becoming chaplain at my beloved Partick Thistle.

And something incredible happened, which you might find hard to believe, but it's true. I became chaplain at Partick Thistle, and we won six out of seven games. And one of the directors came up to me, and he said, Mark, before you came here, I was an atheist, but, he says, I believe in God now, because the only explanation I've got for this current run of form is we've got a chaplain.

So God must be on our side after all. And I said, look, I have to be honest with you that I'm not here to influence results. I'm here to serve people. You know, I'm not here for performance.

I'm here to support the players and look beyond them as players and just get alongside them as people to give them pastoral support and their mental, emotional and wellbeing. The results have

nothing to do with me.

It's all down to the manager. I'm so glad that I said that because we get beat six out of the next eight games and the manager gets sacked. So the bottom line is if you don't take the credit, you don't get the blame. And that's how we've moved on.

[9 : 03] But really all I did at Partick Thistle was just show up week by week at training. They actually had me training with the players, which was great. And they just built relationships of trust so they knew me, they liked me, and they trusted me.

And then I would pray, God, give me those spiritual opportunities. Give me those opportunities to share something of your loves, to share the gospel with these players because we go in pastorally proactive and spiritually reactive.

So we can't go in just, you know, blasting them with the gospel. But as we go in and as we seek to live lives that demand a supernatural explanation, we get asked spiritual questions.

And so it was, I found many, many opportunities came up to share Jesus. Many players actually wanted to come to our church and outreach the events that we put on.

They would come to them as well and God was really doing some fantastic stuff. It was great. And as a result of the work that I did at Partick Thistle, other clubs began to show an interest.

[10 : 10] And so very organically, I started appointing chaplains at different clubs and it just grew and grew and grew till eventually I had to go full time with Sports Chaplaincy Scotland and now my Sunday ministry is more itinerant in nature.

But I want to give you a little insight as to what this is all about. Not to do with football because actually none of this is really to do with football. It's really to do with this scripture.

You are the salt of the earth. And this is the biblical premise behind what we do. So let's turn to the scriptures now and unpack this a little bit.

Jesus said, you are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its salt in us, how can it be made salty again? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Now where I come from in the west of Scotland, this is a very common phrase, salt of the earth.

And it's usually spoken to describe somebody who's very humble and unpretentious down to earth.

[11 : 17] Oh, see the wee man? He's salt of the earth. It's a real compliment. However, when Jesus said this, this was not a compliment. This was actually a commission.

It was a command. It was a challenge. And when the disciples heard this, they would have thought, who? Us? We are salt of the earth.

Because back then, salt was a very precious commodity. Unlike today, where it, you know, it's very cheap, readily available, helpful.

But back then, it was a lifesaver. Absolutely essential for life. The reason being was they didn't have any electricity. So they didn't have any means of freezing or refrigerating food.

And obviously, after a short period of time, meat, fish, etc., could very easily putrefy, go off. And so what they would do is they would soak meat and fish and the like in a salt, liquid substance.

[12 : 20] And what would happen is the salt would draw out the bacteria and kill it and it would keep the fish and meat edible for a considerable time. And so it was very much a lifesaver.

Really, really important. So important, in fact, that Roman soldiers were often paid their salaries in salt. Hence the phrase, he's worthy salt.

And in fact, our English word for salary comes from the Latin word for salt. So when Jesus says, you are the salt of the earth, he's saying to his disciples, you bring value, you bring life, you're there to stop the moral putrefaction in this world.

You're there to bring something of the presence of a holy God into an ungodly context and atmosphere. You are the salt of the earth.

And I believe this is a command to us as well. We are the salt of the earth. God places his church on the earth to be a part of the earth, to infiltrate the earth with his presence.

[13 : 28] And that's essentially what we do as chaplains. We call it incarnational ministry or the ministry of presence. We simply show up on a regular basis.

We love people, we look out for them, we listen to them, we get alongside them, we seek to be ambassadors of Christ, we seek to be representatives of Jesus, and we seek to usher in something of the presence of God into what is a very ungodly atmosphere.

And it's amazing over the years what I've found is that when we go into that environment, obviously the language and the lifestyle is quite different to what you would find in church, but it's amazing

how just being there it changes the atmosphere.

It's amazing the amount of times people have apologized, sorry for swearing or whatever, or become more conscious of the things they say and the things they do just by the very nature of me being there in the midst.

Not that I judge or correct or anything like that, but there's just something that happens. And just being there in the midst, it causes questions to arise and spiritual questions to be asked just by being there.

[14 : 44] The thing about salt is it's no good while it's simply in the salt shaker. And I would consider the church building, if you will, as the salt shaker.

But God wants you to get out of the salt shaker and go where the salt is needed. Now, we all have that pot of salt in our kitchen cupboard that we forgot about.

It's been there for months, maybe years. You discover it, you take it out, and now it's got all damp and it's useless and it's tasteless.

And the only thing you might use it for is to scatter it on your pavement and trample it underfoot if it's icy. That's the only use that it has because you've left it in the cupboard.

And I really believe that what has happened within the church in Scotland right across is that Christians have been content to remain in their little holy huddles, coming out from among them, touching not the unclean, having nothing to do with the world, and they wonder why when they completely separate themselves from the world, they don't have anybody to witness to and win for Jesus.

[15 : 52] Jesus said that we're to be in the world but not of it. In other words, one of the boys but not one of the sheep. But so many times over the years, especially as I began in ministry, I often found that Christians would be proud by how little connection they had with people of the world.

They would be proud that every night was taken up with a Bible study, a prayer meeting, a gathering of believers. They'd be proud of how little Christians or non-Christians they knew and had contact with.

I began to think of it as I would call it COVID Christianity where people are isolated so they can't spread the gospel. And frankly, when the church has that attitude, the church is only going one direction and that's down.

Because the reality is we need to get out of the salt shaker where salt of the earth. We need to get out to where people are at and make connection with them. And that's essentially what we do as chaplains by simply being present in their context, in their environment, in their field, then something of God's presence comes and opportunities arise.

The thing about the world of, let me use football as an example, a lot of people think it's living the dream. You know, it's fellas getting paid silly money for kicking a football around for 90 minutes.

[17 : 17] And that might be the case in a few elite clubs, but it's actually quite tough. It's not as easy as many people think. It's ruthless and it's brutal. And the value that is placed on you is entirely dependent on your latest performance and result.

And so the value that's placed on you will oscillate. You can go from hero to zero within 90 minutes. They say a week is a long time in politics. 90 minutes is a longer time in football.

And very often these young players, their identity is wrapped up in what people think of them and how they're viewed and how they're treated and how they're valued. And it can really mess with them.

So what chaplains do is we simply come in salt of the earth and we give them a taste of God's grace. Because salt is not just there to preserve, it's there to add flavor.

And what we seek to do is give them a flavor of God's grace by how we treat them. Because after all, what is the value that God has placed on you? The value God places on you isn't anything like a transfer fee.

[18 : 23] It's actually the blood of his son Jesus. You haven't been bought with perishable things such as silver and gold but with the precious blood of the Lamb. We are worth dying for in God's economy.

He considers us worth dying for. We're worth the blood of Jesus. That's the price he placed on our head. And when we repent and turn by faith to Christ and are converted, then God's grace is such that the value he has placed on us can never diminish.

It's not dependent on our religious performance or spiritual results. His value upon us remains eternally constant. We're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to these scriptures alone.

Isn't it wonderful to know that we don't need to impress God to remain in him? We're accepted in the beloved. I get 10 out of 10 every day in Christ.

Not because of me, but of Christ and his righteousness. That exchange that took place on the cross where my sin was laid in Jesus and he was punished in my place, whereby when I repent and trust him, his righteousness is placed on me and God sees me through the righteousness of Jesus.

[19 : 38] I wear the robe of his righteousness. That's what makes me eternally acceptable to God. And so, this is how we basically work as chaplains.

We give them a taste of God's grace. The way the world works, I'll treat you the way you treat me. The way we work is, I'm going to treat you the way God treats me in Christ, giving you a taste of God's grace.

Win, lose or draw, love you just the same. And believe me, it messes with their heads they're not used to it. And very often, it's the only experience they have love of God through you.

I want to tell you one story. It's a bit out there so bear with me. One time, a player came to me, I used to train with the players each week and one player came up to me after training and he says, Rev, he says, do you do wains?

Now what he meant was he wanted a naming ceremony for his newborn child, him and his wife. So I said, well yeah, what I would do is we would do a blessing service. I said, I would recognize that your child is created and designed by God and God has a plan and purpose for our life and as you and your wife and your daughter all come to know Christ, you'll all discover what that plan is and I said, so we'd have a service and pray God's blessing on you as a family.

[20 : 58] He said, well, I don't know that I would feel comfortable coming to your church because I live quite a distance away. I probably wouldn't come back and I'd feel really embarrassed with all these other churchgoers and people around about me.

Could you come and do it in my house? Totally understood that because actually for somebody to walk through these doors if they've not really frequented church in the past, it's a big ask.

It's a big shift for them. It can be quite scary. So I totally understood. I said, aye, no problem. I'll come to your house. But anyway, he came to train next week and he says, Rev, I've had a wee thought.

I want all the lads there. I want the whole squad there and my house isn't big enough. So I've hired a function suite in Tiger Tiger nightclub in Glasgow. So are we all right if we do it there?

Now we're having a wee bit of a shift because I think, okay, right? I said, so are we getting to basically take it over? Is it ours for the night? We're no kind of just joining in a nightclub scene?

[21 : 59] He said, no, aye, it's all ours. I thought, right, excellent. But the next thing was, he says, the only thing is, it's a Sunday night. Is that okay? So now I realize I've got to get it past my deacons and elders, right?

Now, at that time, it was a bit of a deacon possessed church, if I can put it that way, in the sense of sometimes it was easier to ask for forgiveness than permission for things. But anyway, I spoke with them, I explained the nature of the opportunity and they totally got it and said, yeah, Mark, go for it. But then I thought, okay, if he doesn't want to come to church, why don't we as church go to him? So I said to him, listen, we've got a worship band that kind of plays kind of Celtic worship style music and I said, not that I would expect everyone to join in singing, but we could just do a kind of presentation of Christian music for you.

Aye, that'd be great. He says, bring them down. So I thought, brilliant. The next bit might be a wee bit out there for you, but at this time we had an outreach team and they did street dance as well as declaring the gospel.

We're from the central belt, so bear with us, we're a bit weird down there, okay, a bit out there. So anyway, my two daughters were in it as well, so I says, how about we bring them down and we kind of, we do that for you?

[23 : 10] Aye, that'd be great. I says, we've also got a puppet team where we put on gospel presentations through the puppets. I says, can I bring my puppet team down as well for all the kids? That'd be fantastic, Rev, bring the whole lot.

So I ended up bringing about 30 people down from our church and we basically invaded Tiger Tiger nightclub and took it over. And we had the opportunity in so many different ways of communicating the gospel, sharing Christ with them.

And at the end of the night, I'm standing up at the bar with one of our players and he's standing with a pint in his hand and he says to me, Rev, that was quite something tonight. I did not expect that. He says, see, to be honest with you, he says, you've really given me some stuff to think about and I'm also going to have to say to you, Rev, see, before tonight, I really struggled to make a connection between you and church because I like you, you're all right.

Think on that for a minute. I struggled to make a connection between you and church because I like you, you're all right. On the flip side, what he was essentially saying, I didn't think you could get anybody who would be normal and nice who was in the church.

[24 : 23] Now that was his, obviously, his experience but it's amazing the amount of people who have these preconceived ideas about us and as a result of that don't want to come near us.

The only way we're going to change that is by being amongst them. And I've been hearing some wonderful accounts of Thomas at Carleway Football Club.

Somebody just shared with me this morning knowing somebody who plays in the team and speaking really well of him and the reality is unless they like us, unless they trust us, they're never going to come to us.

That's what it's got to be. And so many folks have got preconceived ideas, perhaps even genuinely bad experience, but prejudice against God's people and the church.

The only way we're going to change that is being right in the midst of them and demonstrating something different. The Bible says, Jesus said, you are the light of the world.

[25 : 24] It's a very similar concept actually to salt of the earth. If this place was in complete darkness darkness and the blinds were completely down, we would be thankful for candles or torches or anything to give us light, but we don't need light in here, do we?

Loads of light flooding through the windows, loads of light and this is not where the light is needed, folks. The light is needed in the darkness. And yes, sometimes these sports clubs can be quite dark morally.

They can be, let's be honest, but that's where the light is needed. Paul says to the Philippians that we ought to shine like stars in this dark universe.

And the darker the night, the brighter stars shine. And so my challenge to each and every one of us this morning is, where are you doing life whereby you're salt of the earth, whereby you're light in the world, where are you bringing the taste, the flavor of God's grace to?

Where are you bringing something of the light of Christ to? Where are you doing life? Are you different? But different, not in a weird way. Do you know what I mean by that?

[26 : 36] You know, not that people say, oh, aye, that's right, they're a Christian, they don't do this and they don't do that. Are you known as a Christian because of what you don't do or because of what you do do? About who you are and what you're like, how you treat people, how you minister to people, how you love people, how you look out for them, how you listen to them, how you seek to manifest something of the grace of God and the love of Christ.

That's what we ought to be known for rather than what we don't do. So my challenge to you this morning is not that you should all become football club chaplains, that would be great if there were more, but wherever you do life, there's a calling in your life to be chaplain.

Whether that's a neighborhood, place of work, school, college, whatever it might be, whatever you do life, God's commission to you is the same. You're a chaplain there, a representative of Jesus. You don't get to do Jesus on a Sunday and just be yourself the rest of the week. It's no longer I that live, but Christ that lives in me. It's got to be every day, everywhere, every person that we recognize that we are ambassadors of Christ.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you, Lord, for the challenge from your word that we are salt of the earth. There's not even a choice in it. We are light of the world.

[27 : 53] It's a command, a commission, and a challenge. And we ask, Lord, that wherever we are in life, whether that be a place of work, a neighborhood, a school, whatever it might be, that, Lord, we would recognize that everything we say, everything we do, everywhere we go, everything we partake in, we do so as representatives, as ambassadors of Christ, as ministers of reconciliation.

Thank you, Lord, in that sense, every one of us is a minister because you've called us to be ministers of reconciliation, reconciling this lost world to a loving God.
I pray, Lord, that you would challenge us in our everyday lives, Lord, to be that salt of the earth and that light of this world. In Jesus' name, amen.
Thank you.