

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Session 3 – “Salt and Light” – Matthew 5:13-16

Perhaps you have heard the expression: “You may be the only Bible that someone will read.” Think back to your early life: Who showed you what God is like in their life? How did they do that? As we go through this section, think about how you could be the embodiment of that statement.

Often we may feel powerless in our world. But while we may not be able to change the world, Jesus expects us to have a profound influence on those around us.

1. *“You are the salt of the earth.”* What positive qualities of salt can you think of? In the ancient world, salt was highly valued even to the point of being used like money. Biblically, and in our world today, we can connect salt with 5 things:

(1) Purity – it is glistening white. Salt that isn’t pure isn’t any good. Jewish sacrifices offered with salt as a purification (see Leviticus 2:13; hence Paul’s reference in Colossians 4:6). Remember the Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (v. 8) Perhaps you have heard people refer to the idea of purity of life in a negative or derogatory way. What argument could you give for purity of life?

(2) Preservative – antiseptic from corruption. Before refrigeration, salt was used to keep meat from rotting.

What has been in the news lately that indicates society is rotting and decaying? In the light of this aspect of salt, what does Jesus’ statement tell us about society and the church’s role in it? Geoffrey Chaucer lived in a time when the morals of those who claimed to be Christians were noticeably going down hill. What he said could be a warning to all Christians today: “If gold rusts, what should iron do?”

(3) Gives flavor – doesn’t take away! You know what it’s like when something needs salt. Jesus never intended that Christians would be bland and aloof. He said in John 10:10... *“I have come to bring life...abundantly!”*

David would sometimes get so excited about the Lord – the flavor that God had given to his life – he would write a Psalm. In what ways, now and down through time, have Christians added to society?

(4) Makes people thirsty.

Read John 4:1-30 about Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well in Samaria. Note how He made her “thirsty.” How could you make someone thirsty for the Lord? (Remember, once you make someone thirsty, you’ve got to give them some water!)

(5) It is different from that into which it is put.

Especially young people want to be like all of their peers, and to a certain extent that continues into adulthood. Often Christians tell others, “Oh, I’m just like you!” Yes and no. The Bible tells us repeatedly that believers are to be different. **Read 1 Peter 2:9.** (The King James Version uses the term “a peculiar people” – but the meaning of “peculiar” has changed through the years!) How are Christians to be different? This characteristic of “differentness” is also shown by the meaning of the word “holy” which is “set apart.” We also see it in the meaning of the word “church” (ekklesia, in Greek) which referred to “the ones called out for a specific purpose.”

2. Because of the value of salt in the ancient world, if a person wanted to hide it they would dig in the ground and bury their sack of salt. If it was left too long, it would lose its saltiness. The only thing it was good for was to be spread on a path. It would then be less slippery in the wet season and prevent wear in the dry season.

When someone is said to be “the salt of the earth,” it is a great compliment. But in the second half of verse 13, Jesus also gives a warning. In practical terms, what is it? What might cause Christians to lose their saltiness? (Literally, “become insipid.”) Useless invites disaster. (See Revelation 3:15-16) Christians are constantly enjoined to bear good fruit, to use their gifts and to be whole-hearted in their service. (See Romans 12:11) Dr. David Turk writes: “What was then popularly called ‘salt’ was in fact a white powder (perhaps from around the Dead Sea) which, while containing sodium chloride, also contained much else, since in those days there were no refineries. Of this dust, the sodium chloride was probably the most soluble component and so the most easily washed out. The residue of white powder still looked like salt, but was doubtless still called salt, but it neither tasted nor acted like salt.”

3. Jesus’ second statement is “*You are the light of the world.*” As salt we prevent decay, the spread of evil. How does the church’s role as light compliment its role as salt? It is one thing to stop the spread of evil; it is another to promote the spread of truth, beauty and goodness. Jesus calls us to do both. How can we positively promote the spread of truth in the world? Jerusalem was sometimes known as “the light to the Gentiles.” As there are certain characteristics of salt that inform our understanding of that metaphor, so also there are characteristics of light:

(1) It is meant to be seen.

Your Christianity is meant to be seen: there is no such thing as secret discipleship. Either the secrecy destroys the discipleship, or the discipleship destroys the secrecy. Those of you who studied James with us will remember James 2:18... “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” Light is especially valuable in the darkness. What are some “dark” areas of the world that you – or any Christian – might be an effective light? (Notice Jesus didn’t say “You are the light of the church.” He said, “You are the light of the world”!)

(2) It is a guide...it shows the way... it illuminates and makes clear. That’s why there are street lights and headlights on cars. Many would do the right thing, or not do the wrong thing if they just had a guide. What are some practical things that you could do to “show the way” to others? Let me illustrate: One time I visited a young man who was away at graduate school in the LA area. He had been in the high school and college groups I led. That evening he said, “When I was in high school, I was under a lot of peer pressure to do and not do certain things. I wrestled a lot with that. Finally I decided what to do by following your example.” I was, at the same time, warmed, humbled and scared! He had never spoken to me about this at the time, so I never had the opportunity to give him specific counsel. What if my life in front of him had been different?

(3) A warning

Light is used as a warning on emergency vehicles, flares, and lighthouses, etc. Perhaps one of the most tragic sentences that could be uttered: “If only someone had warned me!” When we warn someone, it is not to be done in anger, critically, or in condemnation, but “*speaking the truth in love.*” (Ephesians 4:15) When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, there were many areas where they were having problems, but he said, “*I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.*” (I Corinthians 4:14) How could you warn someone without being condemning?

(4) Overcomes darkness... it is ultimately stronger.

The Apostle John described Jesus as being the light from God in the first chapter of his Gospel. Eugene Peterson in his biblical paraphrase put the 4th verse this way: "The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out." Have you ever been in a cave where it was completely dark? One match, let alone one flashlight, illuminates an amazing amount. What examples have you witnessed of the light of Christ illuminating the world?

4. Jesus calls us to be light – to live in such a way – that others would know that our Christian faith is genuine. Paul Gustave Doré was a 19th century French artist best known for illustrations in Dante's Inferno, Cervante's Don Quixote and Milton's Paradise Lost. Once he came to the border of Switzerland and was asked for his passport, which he had neglected to bring with him. The border guard asked him, "Who are you?" "I am Paul Gustave Doré." The official knew about him – all Europe did – but didn't know him personally. "Prove to me you are Doré." The artist took some paper and began to sketch with skill and ease. The official said, "Enough! You are Doré!" The man saw the real evidence. The world might be unimpressed with professions and creeds, but it does sit up and take notice of those who practice what they profess! Why might we be tempted to hide our light? We may be tempted to hide our light because we are afraid of the people who hate light and what they might do. We may also be embarrassed, timid or unaware of opportunities. Jesus calls us to do good deeds. There are two words for good in Greek: "Agathos" is a qualitative word... good as opposed to bad. "Kalos" – the word used here – is not only good, but also attractive, beautiful and winsome. So this is not the kind of goodness or good deeds which are proud, aloof, cold "nose-in-the-air", or "Aren't I wonderful?" Rather – in humility – not seeking the praise of others, but good deeds done for the sake of those helped. According to Jesus, what is the result of people seeing our good deeds? What are some examples of "good deeds" we can do? How can we do them without being "showy" or draw attention to ourselves? What examples can you think of where the work of Christians has brought people closer to God? What relationship do you see between the Beatitudes and our role as salt and light in society? Our influence depends on our character. What are some ways you could begin having a stronger influence as salt and light?

