

Matthew 5:13-20 – “Salt & Light”

As we looked at the Beatitudes last week we discussed the inner attitudes that are to characterize the citizens of God’s Kingdom. As believers, you’re not just destined to be a part of this Kingdom, you **are presently** a part of this Kingdom. And this Sermon on the Mount is laying out for us this Kingdom Way.

But these inner attitudes are not just to be something we keep within. Do you ever hear that from Christians? *‘My faith is very personal and private. It’s just between me and God.’* Really!? That’s almost equivalent to someone finding the cure for cancer and saying, *‘It’s just something that was a personal discovery. I didn’t want to impose that on others. They should have their own journey!’* And I said it’s *almost* equivalent because we’re not just talking about saving someone from physical death, we’re talking about sparing someone from eternal death!

So in this next section of the Sermon On The Mount, Jesus lays out how these inner attitudes of the Beatitudes are to propel us to live differently outwardly in this world.

1. Salt and Light – 5:13-16

5:13 - *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.*”

Now I’m sure I’m not going to be saying a whole lot that is very new to you. We’re looking at some very familiar passages here. But they’re ones that we need to keep reminding ourselves of because we get away so easily from these things being a mark of our life in Christ.

Jesus says, ***You are the salt of the earth***... Now somebody could read that and wonder, *Jesus, are you giving positive instruction here or is this an insult?* I mean we remember Lot’s wife getting turned to a pillar of salt but I don’t think that was a positive thing. Saying someone is ‘salty’ is not really a compliment today. So, what are we dealing with here?

Well in this day salt was a valuable commodity. It was even used as payment. Some Roman soldiers were paid in salt (it's where we get the expression, 'he's not worth his salt'). Salt had a few different functions:

1. **Salt was a preservative.** This was the most important function for people in this day. When you didn't have the luxuries of refrigeration, salt would be rubbed into the meat to preserve it – to keep it from rotting.
 - In the same way, we are to be living our lives in a way where we are preserving the things of God in this world. We live in an evil time, where more and more people are not just turning away from God but are becoming real enemies of anything associated with God and the Bible.
 - But God has us, the church, active in the world to be a preserving agent. To be upholding the very truths of God and arresting the decay of culture.
2. **Salt adds flavor.** We all know that when you sprinkle a little salt over your meal, some of those flavors just begin to burst. Sometimes what you're eating is so plain and void of anything desirable, and just a sprinkle of salt can change that.
 - As believers we're to be flavorful in this world. We have the life because Jesus is life. And the world doesn't see a lot of hope and joy from the world. In fact the things of the world that people are hoping will bring some sort of contentment keep ending up bland and unsatisfying. But our presence in the world should be bringing a pleasantness; an enjoyment to the world as we live for, and in, Christ.
 - Too often Christianity gets depicted as dull, or boring. Basically, that Christians can't have fun. Nothing should be further from the truth. Our lives should be causing others to think their lives (apart from Christ) are lacking; that there's something more they need. And this leads us to the next function of salt.
3. **Salt promotes thirst.** When you eat something salty, what's going to happen? You get thirsty! You have a real hankering to drink something – to quench that thirst.
 - This too is to be the result of the Christian in the world. We're to be living in a way where others are realizing, I'm a little dry, I suddenly have a thirst for something more than I have presently. Our living as salt in the earth is to cause people to thirst for the Living Water that flows from Jesus Christ.
 - Is your life causing others to say, *'That's what I want for my life. Hanging around this Christian has made me realize I've got a craving that isn't being satisfied from any component in the world.'*

So, as we see, salt is very effective. Here's a couple other effective things it does:

It can be an irritant. Ever gone in the ocean when you have a cut? Ooh, that stings.

- This also provides for us the reason the world is so quick to persecute Christians. There's some open wounds festering on unbelievers, and salty Christians are sometimes going to be seen as an irritant to them.

Salt however is also a great healing agent. The very thing that might be seen as an irritant, is also the very thing that will bring healing.

- When you have a sore throat what's a remedy? Gargle with salt water. When you have a cut, going in the ocean might sting, but it's also going to help speed of the healing of that wound.

Jesus was so wise in using salt as an example of what a Christian should be like. But as Jesus said, salt could end up losing its flavor. And when that happens, it's not good for much. It gets thrown down on the path and walked on.

- "Now, strictly speaking, salt can never lose its saltiness. I am given to understand that sodium chloride is a very stable chemical compound, which is resistant to nearly every attack. Nevertheless, it can become contaminated by mixture with impurities, and then it becomes useless, even dangerous.¹ Desalted salt is unfit even for manure, *i.e.* the compost heap."¹
- So too, losing our saltiness is not equivalent to losing our salvation, but rather losing our effectiveness of being a witness in the world.
- Jesus died for us, redeemed us, not just so we could go our merry way and live our comfortable life. He did this so that we would enter into a relationship with God and live to *'proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light'* (1 Peter 2:9b).
- Are we being that witness or is the world just trampling this testimony down as though it has no value?
- You see this happens when the church ceases to be the church. When the church stops standing up for the truth of the Word of God. We've seen so many churches and Christians begin to compromise in this area and there no longer becomes any distinction between Christians and the world. Many believers would rather just fit in with the world. This ought not to be.

¹ I am indebted to Mr G. J. Hobson, a chemist in Carnforth, Lancashire, for writing to me in August 1972 about this, in order to correct an earlier blunder of mine and to supply a lack in my scientific knowledge.

¹ Stott, J. R. W., & Stott, J. R. W. (1985). *The message of the Sermon on the mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian counter-culture* (p. 60). InterVarsity Press.

- Salt makes a difference. Christians are to make a difference. Don't let things in that will defile, compromise, and corrupt who we are to be for Jesus!
- You could say there's a couple reason why people don't turn to Jesus: One, they've never met a Christian. Two, they have met a Christian. What kind of effect are you having on others?

5:14-15 - *You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.*

Let me point out something Jesus says regarding us being salt and light. He says **You are...** This is written in the emphatic and in the plural. Jesus is saying, 'You, My followers, and nobody else, are to be salt and light in the world.'

And notice, He doesn't say, You will be or you can be, He says, You **are!** This is the reality for the believer right now. If you've put your faith in Jesus Christ, He is dwelling in you through His Holy Spirit, and you now are salt and light. There's no course to take, no mentorship program. It's the reality for you presently as a believer in Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Don't think you're off the hook and this role of being a witness is for the super spiritual elite. Jesus says YOU are to be this way.

- And that's important too. Jesus isn't saying to do something, He's emphasizing how we are to be. When you live out those attitudes in the beatitudes, you're going to be affecting your surroundings like salt affects food and how light affects darkness.

Now to say that we are the light of the world was quite a statement. Because it's what Jesus said of Himself in **John 8:12**, "...I am the light of the world..." Yet we now are to be shining forth His very life through us. We are only able to reflect this light as we continue on in Jesus.

Jesus has called us to be a city placed on a hill that is not to be hidden from the world. Too often Christians feel like they should be in hiding and not bring attention to themselves. But the very nature of light is to illuminate and expose. And what we as Christians are seeking to illuminate is Jesus. We're exposing the condition of the world - that it's in darkness, and the only cure is Jesus.

At this point we should all just break into song: This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine! Hide it under a bush, oh no!

I used to sing that song and had no idea what light I was supposed to be shining. Was I supposed to keep a lighter on me? Sunday School songs that made you go Hmmm...

5:16 - *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

Now here's the thing that we need to recognize, our being lights in the world is not for self-promotion. Jesus had to contend with the religious leaders on this point and we'll see that in a future study in this Sermon on the Mount.

Christians need to conduct themselves in a way where all that they are doing, and the way that they are living, is simply reflecting the goodness of God. Our good works should cause people to give thanks to God for all He's doing through us.

Good works aren't done because we're good people. Good works are done because we're transformed people. God has done the good work of saving us, redeeming us, giving us life in His Son. So the spotlight gets put on God and not ourselves. When someone says, *'Why are you so kind?'*, or *'Why are you so helpful?'*, don't let that be cause to say, *'Well, I guess it's because I'm just so good.'* Rather let it be cause to say, *'Because God has been so good to me.'*

2. Law & Righteousness - 5:17-20

5:17-18 - *Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.*



Now understand, Jesus wasn't coming on to the scene to initiate a new system or religion. He wasn't claiming that this Kingdom Way now meant that the Old Testament was obsolete.

- A lot of people try to make that claim today. They challenge the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. They look at the Old Testament as, well... old!
- Some will claim to be red-letter Christians, meaning they only live by what Jesus says. Others claim we really only need to listen to Paul's teachings. Others will pick the things they like and dismiss other parts that don't fit with their theology.

But please catch what Jesus says. He didn't come to dismiss, destroy, or discredit the Scriptures. He came to fulfill it. You see, Old Testament Scriptures (which are summarized by the Law and the Prophets) were all pointing to Jesus! It was all laying out the plan of God to redeem mankind from their sin. It was mentioned all the way back in Genesis 3, and then throughout the Old Testament we see the unfolding of this plan that would be accomplished through Jesus.

- "The Old Testament is the Gospel in the bud; the New Testament is the Gospel in full flower."²

In fact, Jesus says this Word, the Scriptures, are so solid that not even the minutest part of it (jot or tittle) will pass away before all of it is fulfilled.

- A **jot** (Gk=iota) was the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet and corresponds to the Hebrew letter *yod*, also the smallest letter. 
- A **tittle** was the smallest stroke of a pen; a letter extension, like the difference between an O and a Q.  Hebrew letters: Resh | Daleth
- **Luke 16:17**, "*And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail.*"
- There never has been and never will be any error or failing of God's Word.
- **1 Peter 1:25**, "*But the word of the Lord endures forever.*" Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you."

5:19 - *Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

So, in seeing the validity and solidity of God's Word, Jesus next lays out the relation it is to have with the believer. First and foremost, the believer is to obey it. And not just part of it – all of it! It's not meant to be a buffet where you just pick and choose the things you like.

The law is not bad. Some Christians love to promote that we are no longer under law today. That might be true in how it pertains to salvation, but it's a bad argument to make for general living. I kind of like, do not murder, do not steal. I'm ok with the law. But I understand it cannot save me. Jesus points this out next.

5:20 - *For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*

² Ryle, J. C. (1993). *Matthew* (p. 29). Crossway Books.

I can just imagine Jesus having a bit of fun saying this most provocative statement. The crowds I'm sure were whispering under their breath, '*How is this possible?!*'

- This would be like saying I can't play golf unless I can drive as far as Tiger Woods (or Bryson DeChambeau to be relevant).
- Or you can't be Catholic unless you're more holy than the pope.

It's not possible! Which was exactly the point! It was not possible – by themselves. Righteousness would not come through outward acts. They needed to go beyond what the Pharisees and scribes strived for, and they needed an internal righteousness; the righteousness of God which came through Jesus!

Remember, being poor in spirit was all about recognizing our spiritual poverty. That we have nothing to offer. The Pharisees and scribes thought that they were good because of their observance of the law. But it was a self-righteousness. We fall into that same mistake when we think we're earning our way to heaven by what we do. Our righteousness needs to go beyond that of the religious leaders, not in degree but in kind.

- “He is not saying that you must have a *quantitatively* greater righteousness, something like a righteousness that is numerically greater than the scribes or the Pharisees. To use an academic analogy, it's not that the Pharisees have scored in the low 90's on the holiness test, and entrance into the kingdom of heaven requires a score of 94, 95, or 96. This misses the point altogether. Rather, Jesus is talking about a *qualitatively* different righteousness—a righteousness of a different kind altogether. This is not an outer righteousness to show everyone how good we look, but an inner righteousness that shows how gracious and powerful God is.”³

Jesus is pointing us to a righteousness of the heart and it's based on what He provides for us.

And so, Jesus will begin to go through some of their laws and show them the true meaning of the law – God's intent of the law. He will show that it is more so a matter of the heart.

³ Platt, D. (2013). *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (D. L. Akin, D. Platt, & T. Merida, Eds.; p. 96). Holman Reference.