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June 19, 2022

Salt and Light (Matthew 5:13-16)

If the Beatitudes show us that the way to true happiness is in following Jesus, then the following verses show us that the way to change the world is to follow Jesus in our daily walk. The early church did this. They started out as just a small band of believers. They ended up transforming the world.

Matthew 5:13-16 gives us two metaphors for the Christian life—salt and light. Within these metaphors are common themes, so rather than look at Salt and Light separately, repeating the themes, we will look at the two main themes and how they are brought out in the metaphors of salt and light.

The World: Corrupted Creation

The first theme is the nature of the world in which we live. Going back to Genesis 1 and 2, we know that all God's creation was "very good." Nature functioned in perfect order, man exercised stewardship over creation, without misusing or exploiting it. Relations between the first man and woman, and between themselves and God, were harmonious and unhindered by any barrier. When man brought sin into the world, he disrupted this and introduced corruption and decay into every corner of creation and of the human person. To stop that corruption and decay, Jesus tells us we need "salt."

The World needs Salt

In the ancient world, as today, salt had many uses; but its basic function in Jesus' day was as a preservative. To get fish from the nets to the market to the table, salt had to be used. The fresh catch was salted down before going to market, and the fish purchased at the market were either eaten immediately or salt-cured. Otherwise, as we all know, in the heat of the day and without refrigeration, putrefaction and decay would set in very quickly.

In the crowd listening to Jesus that day were fishermen who knew this well. Perhaps there were families getting ready to eat salted fish for lunch. The ancient world understood well the need for salt. Today we live in a world desperately in need of salt to stop the moral and spiritual putrefaction and decay.

The World needs Light

The world also needs light. Darkness is a significant symbol in Scripture. Romans 1:21 speaks of darkness as spiritual ignorance. When people reject the knowledge of God and turn to the worship of created things, darkness sets in. In John 3:19-21 Jesus speaks of darkness as evil: “Men love darkness instead of light because their deeds are evil.” And in Matthew 22:13 Jesus refers to outer darkness as the place of eternal judgment and spiritual death. The world is caught in this darkness, but doesn’t think of itself in this way.

At the end of the 19th century, most learned people believed that the Age of Enlightenment had brought us to a higher level of consciousness. They believed we were on the cusp of a new era of peace and prosperity. WWI did not dampen the enthusiasm. It was called, “the war to end all wars.” But then came WWII and many subsequent conflicts. Yet somehow we came to believe, at least in the west, a new world order had been established. People enjoyed unprecedented peace and prosperity. Fast forward several decades to the war in Ukraine. We scratch our heads – “but we don’t do this anymore. We’re beyond that.” Yes, we do, and no, we aren’t. Evil still exists in every corner of the world and every corner of the human heart. Martin Lloyd-Jones reminds us, “The world is bad, sinful and evil; and any optimism with regard to it is not only thoroughly unscriptural, but has actually been falsified by history itself.” Jesus sees us as we are. We need salt and light. Salt to stop the putrefaction and decay. Light to expose our dark deeds.

The Believer’s Place in the World, or How to be Salt and Light

The second and central theme in the passage is the place of the believer in this world. And it is remarkable. He says “you are the salt of the earth.” The grammatical form here places a strong emphasis on the “you.” He’s not talking to some vague group, or to the church in general. You – *you* who hear me, and specifically, you who live out the beatitudes in daily life – *you* are the salt of the earth.

Influential Presence

To preserve a fresh catch with salt, the salt is spread over the surface and left to dissolve and permeate the surface, affecting the whole fish. That's how Jesus looks at us – an influential presence spread out in a needy world. Please note, we are not talking about the church *gathered*. If you want to preserve a fish, you don't make a pile of salt just below the dorsal fin – you spread it out. Haddon Robinson says “Whenever the church gathered becomes a salt warehouse, it has missed Jesus' basic lesson that salt must come in context.” Or as an old, experienced missionary told a group of younger workers, “Missionaries are like manure, spread out they do a lot of good, but keep them piled up in one place too long, and they really begin to stink.”

We are placed in this world to spread out and penetrate our culture and spheres of influence. Our mission is to stop the decay. In the Book of Acts we read about the Lord adding to the number of the saved. On the day of Pentecost 3,000 were saved. Thousands and thousands more after that, first in Jerusalem and then throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. It happened as people shared their faith in the temple courts and from house to house, in the marketplace or at work (think of Paul sewing tents), in the hostile “market” of philosophy or synagogue; in prison and even in court on trial for their lives (“King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do....” Acts 26:27). Sometimes they were specifically sent. Most often, they simply shared along the way as they carried out their lives within the context and relationships the Lord had given them. Living a Beatitude life in a rotting world – that is what it means to be the salt of the earth.

Life-Giving Presence

Next, Jesus describes the place of the Christian in the world as light. If salt is an influential presence, then light is a life-giving presence. In Isaiah 9:2 we read, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” That's Jesus! And then in John 8:12 Jesus says, “I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Jesus came to bring light, and life; and ultimately He did that on the cross. He took our sin and the condemnation we deserve and died in our place. In exchange, to all who believe, He offers a loving relationship with the Father, forgiveness of sins, and eternal

life. He is the Light of the World and then, amazingly, He says “*You* are the light of the world.” We are a life-giving presence and witness (more on witness later) that can’t be hidden. The illustration used is that of a city on a hill. Without artificial light, night-time in the ancient world was inky black. If you’ve ever stood out at night in a truly dark place to observe the stars, it’s amazing how much is visible if you can get 50 or 100 miles away from any significant light pollution. But even then, the smallest light stands out against the surrounding darkness. At night in the ancient world, a city on a hill, with oil lamps shining through hundreds of windows, stood out brilliantly. That’s what our life is to look like.

Again, notice that Jesus says “*You* are.” He emphasizes the individual. He’s not talking about the church as a city on a hill, He is not talking of “someone else,” but you and me. When we follow Jesus day in and day out in a dark world, our presence testifies to the truth and holiness of Jesus Christ and the life that He gives. Jesus is not talking to people in influential or powerful stations in life. The transformation he speaks of is not through political or financial exertion of power, but rather the power of a transformed life.

This week I read about a revival in a fairly small town in England that came about through the ministry of Richard Baxter. The Holy Spirit moved and brought revival first among the church members, and then through them into their families, neighborhoods and places of work. In the end, the whole town was transformed! Crime and vice reduced sharply. The transformation of culture happened not through activism or exercise of power, as if passing new laws would change the heart. But rather, from the bottom up. Changed hearts, changed culture. That’s what it is to be salt and light.

When the Believer is Like the World: Forgetting our Mission

In this passage Jesus also talks about what happens when the Christian becomes like the world. Jesus jumps into this immediately: “You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, what good is it except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

This is, in fact, an absurdity. The word here for “lose saltiness” is not a chemical word. It literally means, to become foolish or stupefied, to play the fool. The very idea of salt not being salty is moronic and contradictory. If it’s not salty, it’s not salt!

Same thing with light. Imagine that pitch-black ancient evening we described. Lights out, everyone's in bed, and one of the kids gets sick. You stumble around looking for the lantern and somehow get it lit. And then put it under a bowl to hide the light. Insane! Useless! The whole point of the light is to put it up on a stand so that the light diffuses and disseminates within the room so you can see what you're doing. Any other action is contrary to the very nature of light.

Salt that is not salty. Light that gives no light, if these things are true, it should cause us to question the very nature of our faith. We are speaking here, of course, of lost influence and the lack of a preserving effect when a Christian participates in the world rather than standing out in contrast to it. Not necessarily speaking of Cary Alliance, but of the church in our country.

Our divorce rate, and use of porn is barely distinguishable from the world around us. Christian teens rebel against their parents and parents spew vitriol on social media. We turn our politicians (on both sides) into idols and ideologies that become a new sort of gospel that we pretend will change the world. We use our money to accumulate a mountain of possessions not so different from our neighbors. If we are indistinguishable from the world, we are part of the problem.

Putting it into Action

“So let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) First, recognize the fact as Jesus states it – “*your* light.” You have light. You are light. This is not an exhortation, or a call. It is a statement. Christian, you are light. The question is, what kind of light?

Second, examine how your light shines. Jesus says that our light is to be visible: “that men may see your good deeds.” The believer who follows Jesus in the world is noticeable. The attention may not always be favorable. We may even face persecution. but you can't help but stand out. And for some, that difference is attractive. This will lead to opportunities to “give account for the hope” that we have (1 Peter 3:15.)

Witness

Remember, I promised we'd mention witness? There can be a gap between the “seeing” and the “giving glory.” Jesus assumes that those who see also know what they are really

seeing. They understand the difference and how they can give glory to God with their own lives. Our life-giving presence must be accompanied by life-giving witness that is clear and compelling.

Reflect!

And finally, our life is reflective. We are not in this for ourselves, for vainglory-seeking, attracting attention to ourselves and what wonderful people we are. For the beatitude-living believer, self has been forgotten in poverty of spirit, meek humility, and hunger for righteousness. As we reflect the beauty, holiness, grace, and life-giving love of our Savior within the world, all the glory is reflected back to Him.

Martin Lloyd-Jones said, "You and I are living in the midst of men and women who are in a state of gross darkness. They will never have any light anywhere in this world except from you and from me and the Gospel we believe and teach."