

SALT AND LIGHT

MATTHEW 5:13-16

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

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LAST WEEK WE CONCLUDED A STUDY ON THE Beatitudes. Perhaps some of you remember what inspired Jesus to stand up and teach His disciples the Beatitudes in the first place. In case you forgot, let me remind you. It was a vision of the crowds that inspired Jesus to teach His disciples these Beatitudes. All the blessings mentioned in the section of scripture that we call the Beatitudes were never meant just for Christ's disciples. They were meant to be passed on to the crowds.

So when we come to the end of the Beatitudes, it shouldn't be surprising to find Jesus teaching His disciples about their mission to the world. Their mission was to see that the blessings just talked about were passed on to the rest of the world. In fact it can be argued that the main way God passes His blessings on to people of the world is by causing them to come into contact with people who have already received the blessings mentioned in the Beatitudes.

So in MATTHEW 5:13, Jesus tells His disciples, "You are the salt of the earth." And in MATTHEW 5:14, He says to them, "You are the light of the world." These two statements reveal something about the nature of the world as well as the nature of the Christian.

Indirectly, these two statements tell us that the world is not in good shape. The human race is not making steady moral improvement. Morally speaking, things have always been bad, they still remain bad, and they are not going to get better.

Salt is used either to kill germs or to provide taste. The reason something needs salt is because, without the salt, there will either be decay or tastelessness. Likewise, light is used to eliminate darkness. Without light, there will be darkness.

So these two figures of speech tell us that there is something wrong with our world. The world is full of moral decay, and life is meaningless. People are groping in the darkness. Christians, of all people, should not be surprised. The Bible clearly teaches that, as the result of sin and the fall, life in the world in general tends toward moral decay. There are many illustrations of this in the Bible. You see it in the very first book. Though God made the world perfect, because sin entered, humanity began to become progressively evil. By the time we reach the sixth chapter of GENESIS, we find God saying, "My Spirit

shall not always strive with man." The moral pollution had become so great that God had to send a flood. And then there was a new start. But still the evil of mankind progressively became worse until we come to Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities where evil so permeated society that there were not even ten righteous people who could be found. This is the kind of story that the Bible constantly is putting before us. It is a story of a persistent tendency toward moral decay.

I am told that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, people were convinced the world was going to get better. But now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the dream of a better world has been shattered. The world is bad, sinful, and evil. Not only does the Bible testify to this fact, but now history along with current events have convinced even those who do not believe in the Bible that the human race tends toward moral decay. Just as a piece of meat left outside of the refrigerator will eventually rot, so will the human race, left on its own, become morally rotten.

We will never use salt unless we are convinced there is a need to use it. In the same way, we must have a vision of the human race in a general bent toward moral decay before we understand the importance of our role as spiritual salt and light in this world. When Jesus said, "You are salt of the earth" and "You are light of the world," He strongly implied that our world is full of corruption and darkness.

With that in mind, I will now turn to the more direct meaning of these two statements, "You are salt," and "You are light." What principles can we draw from these statements?

First, but not always so obvious in practice, *we are to be different from the world.* We are to have the character traits that Jesus taught in the Beatitudes, and this will make us different from the majority of people around us. If we are not different, then we are good for nothing. The Christian man must be as different from the world as salt is from the meat into which it is rubbed. The contrast must be as great as the contrast between light and dark. Now that is easy to say but hard to experience. The main reason why the church fails to impact society is because those who claim to be Christian are really no different from those who do not claim to be Christian.

A *second* principle implied from these statements is that *the role of a Christian in society is, at*

least in part, a negative one. Jesus said that we are to be salt before He said that we are to be light. And the primary function of salt is negative and not positive. Just as salt placed in a wound hurts, so should the presence of the Christian in a corrupt society cause discomfort to that society. Salt is added to meat in order to destroy the germs that cause decay. In the same way, when a Christian walks into a room of non-Christians, his very presence should have an immediate affect. He should not even have to say a word. His presence in the room should cause the conversation of the group to change. When it comes to the role of the Christian, the most important thing is that his presence first creates an atmosphere where people feel uncomfortable about their condition. We must be salt before we can be light. We must, by virtue of who we are, produce an atmosphere where people feel constrained or ashamed to act in an ungodly way before we can proclaim the truth that will set people free.

The best witness a person can have is when others first notice there is something different about him. When people look at you, they should be saying, "There is something different about him" or "There's something different about her." And as they watch your conduct and your behavior, they should begin to ask questions. And then the light begins to shine as you have earned the right to speak and teach them what has made the difference. Far too often, we tend to reverse the order. We want to first speak in a very impressive way, and then we try (and often fail) to match our testimony with our words.

Another [*a third*] principle we can learn from the statements "You are salt" and "You are light" is that *the most important work of the Church is not its scheduled services; rather, it is the witness of its members.* Jesus said, "You are salt" and "You are light." He did not say, "You have salt" and "You have light." And Jesus did not say "You are to distribute the salt" and "You are to broadcast the light."

One of the biggest challenges teachers and small group leaders face is helping people go beyond the point of just understanding truth and making proclamations where we denounce certain groups of

people or certain types of behavior. I have sat in classrooms and in homes where a Bible study concludes with people proclaiming how a certain truth should be applied. For instance, they may proclaim that homosexuality is a sin and denounce those who practice such a sin. But when a group of Christians uses this approach to the Bible as their only way of interacting with truth, then something very important is missing. Although they have discovered the light, they have failed to be light. They rightfully claim to have the salt and to possess the light. They are doing their best to distribute the salt and broadcast the light, and that's not bad. But Jesus wants us to do more. Jesus wants us to be salt and to be light.

Some time ago I heard a preacher being interviewed by a newsman. The newsman asked him what he thought about homosexuals. The preacher replied, "My message to homosexuals is, "We love you. Come and join us in our struggle against sin." To be salt and to be light we must somehow invite the world to join us. Somehow we have to get beyond just discovering what the truth is and proclaiming how people should apply truth to their lives. We need to do that, but we need to do more. We need to show the world how we ourselves are struggling with sin. As they see how serious and dedicated we are in our struggle, we will then become salt and light, and that will attract those from the world who are hungry for something real.

The last [*fourth*] principle I would like to point out from the statements "You are salt" and "You are light" is that, *apart from the true Christian, there is no hope for our world.* Jesus did not mention any other possibility of hope for the world. Salt and salt alone, is needed to fight the moral decay of the world. Light and light alone, is needed where there is darkness.

In the minds of Christ's disciples, salt and light were two things that could no be replaced. What salt and light did, nothing else could do. In their thinking, nothing else could prevent decay like salt and nothing but light could eliminate the darkness. So Jesus used the figures of salt and light to emphasize that there is nothing else that can replace the testimony of the Christian. Christians are not one source of salt and light, they *are* the salt and light of the world. That statement cannot be said about anything else.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

Matthew 5:13-14

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand, and He wants Christians in every age to understand that we are essential if the world is going to change. This truth is found throughout scripture. For instance, in 1 PETER 2:9, the apostle Peter said, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.” The portion of scripture we read from PHILIPPIANS 2 says that we are like shining stars in the universe; therefore, we should hold out the word of life. Our mission to change the world by virtue of who we are is extremely important, because if we do not do it, it won’t be done.

Jesus was anxious that His disciples understand this truth. That is why He used a few negative statements to emphasize the fact that if they fail in their mission to influence the world, then they will become useless. “When salt loses its saltiness it is no longer good for anything.” It is ridiculous to try and hide light. But the very fact that Jesus warns us against doing it reveals our tendency as people to try and hold back from being a witness. We shy away from our essential mission to the world. But Jesus wants us to see that this is a dangerous practice for anyone who professes to be a Christian. Jesus said “the only thing that useless salt is good for is to be thrown out and trampled upon.”

Nothing is more useless than the nominal Christian. What I mean is one who has the name but not the quality of a Christian. They appear to be Christian, but they are not. They want to look like Christians, but they are not functioning as Christians. The apostle Paul said that they have the form of godliness, but they deny the power of godliness. They are like salt without flavor and light without light.

What I am really saying is that the true Christian cannot be hid. He cannot escape notice. If we, who proclaim the name of Christ, try to hide who we are, then we will only be cheating ourselves. And if we succeed, then it proves that we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we are Christians when we are really not.

So how do we fight the temptation to hide our true nature? *We do so by reminding ourselves that, for many people, we provide their one and only hope for change.* Through our testimony alone they will know about the blood of Jesus which can save them from their sins. We need a sincere compassion for the souls of people around us who face the prospect of hell. That compassion, combined with the knowledge that without our testimony they may never have another

chance to know how to be saved, will compel us to let our lights shine.

But in letting our lights shine, it is good to remember the illustration of the oil lamp. With the oil lamp, two things are essential to produce light. One is the oil, and the other is the wick. The oil represents the very life the Holy Spirit has given us. The oil is essential. Without it, the wick will never have light. The whole point of the Beatitudes is to emphasize the importance of Christian character that is given by God through the work of the Holy Spirit. So before we even talk about the wick, we must ask ourselves, do we have this life?

Our first concern is that we have oil. Our second concern is that the wick be kept trimmed so the flame can burn brightly.

I would like to use the illustration of the oil lamp to point out the delicate balance between grace and works. God gives us Christian character. We can’t produce Christian character on our own. We can desire it and ask for it, but it comes as a gift from God. God pours the oil into the lamp by filling us with His Holy Spirit. But there is a part of the Christian life that requires a great amount of effort on our part. We have to work hard at being a witness. We have to work at putting into practice everything that God has empowered us to be. We must continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us to will and to act according to His good purpose (PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13). God provides the oil, but we must work at trimming the wick.

We are living in the midst of people who no nothing but darkness. Many of them will never have any light anywhere in this world except from you and me and the gospel that we believe and teach. These people are watching us. Do they see something different about us? Are our lives a silent rebuke to them? Do we live in such a way as to cause them to ask us, “Why do you always look so peaceful? How are you so balanced? How can you stand up to things the way you do? Why aren’t you dependent on the artificial aids and pleasures of this world like we are? What is it that you have? I want it too.” If they ask us these questions, then we can tell them that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He can give them a new nature and a new life. Christians alone are the salt and light of this world. Let us live in such a way that people will see it.

Application: Let’s try to be honest with the condition of our witness. How is the oil doing in your lamp? What is the condition of your wick?