

Sermons on Matthew

Matthew 5:13-16
Salt and Light

With Study Questions

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Matthew 5:13-16

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. ⁻¹⁴⁻ 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*. ⁻¹⁶⁻ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).

Introduction

An athlete I coached had a volatile personality. He continually found himself in physical confrontations (fights)—once with a police officer resulting in a sentence of ninety days of community service. I invited him to a church camp. He accepted.

During the camp there was a volleyball tournament. My team made it to the finals. He sat and watched the finals with great interest. My team lost. After the finals he approached me and confessed that he had been praying for the other team to win. I asked him why. “I wanted to see how you respond to losing,” was his answer.

He was looking for help. He was looking for an example. He was looking for salt and light. On this particular occasion he picked me. People operate under the assumption that if there is gold on the ground, there must be gold underneath as well. Although Jesus doesn’t use the element of gold to illustrate His point above, you better believe if salt and light were as rare as gold, their value would be inestimable. What Christians are to provide, in terms of being salt and light, is rich, unique, and beyond value.

The world needs seasoning

Christian salt and light is necessary because of man’s enslavement to his own evil nature and subsequent alienation from God. The Scriptures offer unambiguous testimony of this (Genesis 6:11, 12; 8:21; Psalm 14: 2, 3; Romans 3:9-18; Ephesians 2:1-3). The human race is to God what flavorless food was to Job.

Can flavorless food be eaten without salt? Or is there *any* taste in the white of an egg? ⁷My soul refuses to touch them; they *are* as loathsome food to me (Job 6:6, 7).

What makes the Christian a giver of good flavor? What makes him a luminary (source of light)? The context seems to demand that a Christian’s ability to bestow flavor and produce light are tied to the attributes of which Jesus already spoke—being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry, and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart and peacemaking.

The Third Element of Faith

Since I already spoke in detail concerning these attributes and their attending blessings, I won’t do so again here; Jesus will cite other attributes as His sermon continues. But I will mention that Jesus has now moved from the third person to the second person. It is no longer merely *them*, but *you*.

A study of saving faith reveals that it has three elements. *Notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (trust). Many people have the first two. They know of Christian things and even agree that they are right or good. But eventually the conversation must move from *it* to *you*. The subject under our discussion, do you trust in it? Is it yours? Or are you merely an observer?

We are all to take the words of Jesus very personally!

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 (Matthew 5:13).

The Salt of the Earth

When Jesus uses the element of salt as an illustration, it may propel our thinking into any number of purposes and values of salt. It was used in worship (Exodus 30:35). Newborn children were rubbed with it (Ezekiel 16:4). Lasting covenants were made with it (2 Chronicles 13:5). It's a preservative. Salt serves as a symbol of proper Christian speech.

_Let your speech always be __with grace, __seasoned with salt, __that you may know how you ought to answer each one (Colossians 4:6).

What does salt typify in the present context? Allow me to suggest that Christians are to view themselves as that ingredient, which when added to the world, aids in making the world acceptable to God. I hope to make this clearer in a moment.

Silly Salt

Jesus is quick to issue a warning: **"If the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned?"** One does not season a season. Matthew Henry rightly observes, **"Salt is a remedy for unsavoury meat, but there is no remedy for unsavoury salt."**¹ It is quite amazing how a little salt can transform an entirely bland serving of food. If I'm making sauce, taste it, and recognize it to be in need of flavoring, I add salt. If I taste the salt and find it to be tasteless I merely throw it out.

Literally what Jesus is saying about the salt is that it has become foolish (*morainomai*). It is where we get the word moron. Paul uses this word in the first chapter of Romans when he states, **"__Professing to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:22).**

A Trampled Church

When the salt reaches this pitiful estate it is **"good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men."** One can imagine the Pharisees listening in the shadows. Later Jesus would tell these religious leaders, **"Therefore I say to you, __the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Matthew 21:43).** They, as those who had scandalized the kingdom of God, would soon find themselves trampled under foot.

¹ Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 5:13). Peabody: Hendrickson.

Today's church should take heed. The apostle Paul issued the very clear warning that this same faithless scandalizing is possible for churches in the new covenant as well (Romans 11:19-24). And has this not been the case in our current culture? Female and homosexual ministers, the church marketing itself like a grocery store,² the utter neglect of the sacraments, the dismissal of God's law as a standard of righteousness, the presentation of the gospel as if grace were a joint venture of man and God—all reveal that the church is ripe for trampling.

The moral and theological descent of today's western church often causes me to be embarrassed of my calling. When people ask me what I do and I answer by saying, "I am a pastor," I don't feel like I am put in a category of nobility. I don't feel like I'm thought of as a Jonathon Edwards, a Richard Baxter, or a John Calvin. I feel more like I'm thought of as a game-show host. Matthew Henry said it well,-

A wicked man is the worst of creatures; a wicked Christian is the worst of men; and a wicked minister is the worst of Christians.³

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:14).

In a controversial interview with the basketball star Charles Barclay, he sought to divest himself of the responsibility of being an example for today's youth. Rock stars Tom Petty and Bob Dylan both recoiled at the idea of being role models. But they simply have no option. Whether they like it or not their station in life necessitates they be just that. The only question is whether or not they will be good examples and good role models.

Christians as Light

Jesus is using the second person indicative in this statement. He is not saying Christians should be the light of the world. He is saying they *are* the light of the world. Light is also a description of Jesus Himself (John 8:12). It should cause us great pause to realize that Jesus is using this word to describe Christians.

On the one hand Christians should expect the same negative reaction from the world that Jesus—the light—received

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.⁻²⁰⁻ For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (John 3:19-20).

On the other hand, many (when by the grace of God their woeful condition became apparent to them) came to the light. Jesus has now ascended to the right hand of His Father and has commissioned Christians to be the light. When the ship is caught in the tempest Christians become the lighthouse. Again, it is the indicative. Christians

² One member observed a church advertising Starbucks' coffee at their 9:00 and 11:00 services. The accompanying sign read, "What would Jesus drink?"

³ Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 5:13). Peabody: Hendrickson.

are the lighthouses. Whether or not their light shines brightly or dimly becomes an issue in all our lives and is pursued by Jesus in His next two sentences.

Salt and Light

Before discussing that, allow me to clarify a statement I made earlier about Christians being the ingredient which, when added to the world, aids in making the world acceptable to God. The world is acceptable to God only through Christ. The means by which Christ is glorified is by the advancement of His church, His kingdom. This is where His people fellowship, His message is preached, His victory is proclaimed, His sacraments administered, His praises sung.

Jesus compared His kingdom to a mustard seed which starts small, gets large, and provides shade and refuge for the birds. Similar to light the emphasis is on its vastness. He also compared His kingdom to leaven which permeates the entire loaf. Similar to salt, the emphasis is on the internal effects of the element. Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown explain it well:

Salt operates *internally*, in the mass with which it comes in contact; the sunlight operates *externally*, irradiating all that it reaches.⁴

In short, Jesus is teaching that He has chosen you to advance His kingdom by both the outward observation of your life and inward influence of your behavior.

City on a Hill

Jesus compares us to a city on a hill. Perhaps He had the cities of refuge in mind. These were six cities God had determined to protect people who had committed a crime from the avenger of blood (Joshua 20:7). Most of them were on hills. The criminal could view that city as a sanctuary. Perhaps Jesus is telling Christians they are to be a place where the message of sanctuary and refuge is found. This comports nicely with His call for us to be peacemakers—facilitating peace between God and man through Christ.

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* (Matthew 5:15).

The things of which we are speaking are of no use unless they are seen. There is no point having a lighthouse under a tarp, and salt should be pungent. Jesus, therefore, states,

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and __glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

We finally arrive at the imperative. Jesus is no longer indicating what the case is; He is telling us what we ought to do. We are to let our light shine before men. This gets kind of tricky. Jesus is going to spend the entire sixth chapter of this sermon telling us not to do our deeds to be seen by men. How do we reconcile this apparent conundrum?

⁴ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 5:14). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

I would like to offer a couple of subtle distinctions between what He says here and what He will teach in chapter six.

Outward Observation

First, there is simply no avoiding the fact that we are observed by men and should take that into account in our behavior. The apostle Paul writes about,

...providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men (2 Corinthians 8:21).

So I shouldn't go to a wedding, or to church, smelly and unkempt because I have piously discerned that God is concerned with my heart rather than my outward appearance. Outward appearance does matter.

Yet at the same time we shouldn't be overly concerned with our outward appearance. For the Pharisees (the examples of chapter six) it was their main concern. They were clean on the outside yet dead on the inside (Matthew 23:27).

Glory to God

Secondly, glory to God seems to be the culminating issue with Jesus here. Glorifying God is, after all, the chief purpose of man. So it seems, in stark contrast to the pride of the Pharisees, that the necessary conclusion for us to draw is that God is to be given all the credit for our good works. We are to acknowledge God as the source of our good works and depend upon God as the one who (as with the Egyptians in Exodus 12:36 and the early church Acts 2:47) brings glory to Himself through those good works.

We must resist seeking to find some basis or source of redemption in and of ourselves. We are to give all glory to God. This includes our very hearts and wills. Calvin states,

Now, if the glory of good works cannot be properly ascribed to God, unless they are traced to him, and unless he is acknowledged to be their only Author, it is evident, that we cannot, without offering an open and gross insult to God, extol free will, as if good works proceeded wholly, or in part, from its power. Again, we must observe, how graciously God deals with us, when he calls the good works *ours*, the entire praise of which would justly be ascribed to himself.⁵

The long and short of this portion of Christ's sermon is that the church—Christians—must view themselves as that ingredient that Jesus has determined to bring redemption to humanity. We are to live and we are to live well. And when this good living is observed by the natural man it must be made known that it is God and God alone who deserves all glory.

If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in

⁵Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the __dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Peter 4:11).

Questions for Study

1. Why does the world need salt and light (pages 1, 2)?
2. What makes a Christian a source of salt and light (pages 1, 2)?
3. What are the elements of faith (page 2)?
4. What does salt typify (page 2)?
5. Why is it significant that Jesus moved to the second person (page 4)?
6. How does salt lose its flavor? Give some examples (pages 2, 3).
7. What should Christians expect as the light of the world (page 4)?
8. Discuss the comparison made between salt and light and leaven and a mustard seed (page 4)?
9. What was a city of refuge and how can a Christian be one (page 5)?
10. How can Christians do their good works before men and yet still avoid being prideful (pages 5, 6)?