

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Much And Play So Poorly

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 5:3 ESV)

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”

(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)

Salt and Light

January 9th, 2022

Matthew 5:13-16

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I'd invite you to open it now to Matthew chapter 5. We are resuming our long, slow walk through the Sermon On The Mount and this morning we are entering into a new section of the text. Before the Christmas break we were looking at the Beatitudes, which depict for us the **normative character** of the Christian, now here in verses 13-16, we begin to look at the **expected influence** of the Christian in the world.

Christianity is not a theory or an equation – it's not something we think about all by ourselves in a dark room - it is something WE LIVE OUT in THE WORLD in regular contact with OTHER PEOPLE.

So – how do we do that? What does that look like? It is to those sorts of questions that we turn our attention to this morning. Hopefully you have your Bibles open by now to Matthew 5; hear now the words of Jesus, beginning at verse 13:

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13–16 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

In this brief challenge Jesus makes use of two overlapping metaphors to describe the nature of Christian influence in the world. I want to take a few minutes and unpack those metaphors then we’ll talk about how to apply them and then lastly we will use them to take our own temperature in terms of how we are living out this command and commission from the Lord.

First of all then, let’s make sure that we are understanding what Jesus is saying by use of these metaphors.

Unpacking The Metaphors

Salt and light were arguably the most recognizable household metaphors in the first century. Pretty much every day Jesus as a young boy would have seen his mother Mary using salt and lighting lamps – so he is making use of very common imagery here. Let’s begin where he began, with the metaphor of salt.

1. Salt

You are the SALT of the earth, Jesus says. Salt in the first century world was used primarily to preserve meat. They didn’t have refrigeration in those days, so if you wanted meat to last more than a few hours, you preserved it by rubbing it and curing it with salt. So by telling his disciples that they are the salt of the earth Jesus is saying that part of their job is to restrain the world in its head long plunge into corruption.

The metaphor assumes two things: it assumes a continuing fall – away from God and deeper and deeper into corruption, and it assumes that Christians have been rescued OUT of that general decline.

The metaphor further seems to suggest that we can't completely ARREST the decline of the world – but we can SLOW IT; we can function as a restraint. That's part of our calling. Salt PRESERVES the meat – but of course, salt also FLAVOURS the meat; there is a second nuance to this metaphor. In the Book of Job for example, he says:

“Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt” (Job 6:6 ESV)

So when Jesus says to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth” he means that they bring flavour, they bring something good, they make the world look, smell and taste a little better than it actually is.

So salt makes things BETTER and salt fights off DECAY.

Alright, but what about LIGHT? What does Jesus mean he says to his disciples: “You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:14 ESV)

2. Light

Now that's a really interesting one because Jesus in John 8:12 says that he is the Light of the world. He says:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12 ESV)

So which is it? Is Jesus the Light of the world or are we, as his disciples? And of course, the answer is BOTH. Jesus is the light and we reflect that light in so far as we follow him. In that sense we are like the MOON reflecting the light of the sun into a dark world.

Now we should notice that Jesus equates the light that we shine specifically with our good works. He says:

“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your **good works** and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16 ESV)

So SHINING your LIGHT equates with doing GOOD WORKS – or living a good Christian life, that’s interesting. The assumption in the Bible does seem to be that if we live good lives, people will draw near and they will come close enough for us to speak to them – so I’m not trying to separate good works from good words – in fact I think they are basically one and the same in the biblical context. John Stott says here:

“It seems that ‘good works’ is a general expression to cover everything a Christian says and does because he is a Christian, every outward and visible manifestation of his Christian faith. Since light is a common biblical symbol of truth, a Christian’s shining light must surely include his spoken testimony.”¹

So it’s both/and – with the one leading inevitably to the other – meaning, if we live a certain way, eventually, we will be asked to explain ourselves. The Apostle Peter makes that same assumption. He says:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (1 Peter 3:15–16 NIV11)

The assumption there is that if Christians do good works and live good lives, people are going to ask them about that – and they should be ready to spring into action when that happens. You should have your Gospel presentation on standby, he says, on the assumption that good living will facilitate good conversations with friends and neighbours.

Ok – so light ATTRACTS, that’s the first part of the metaphor. Everybody knows that, even today in a world FILLED with light, we understand that light attracts. If you’ve ever sat outside in the dark with porch light on then you understand the expression “like a moth to a flame” – light attracts! It will attract people for a variety of reasons. Hopefully it will draw friends and neighbours in for a conversation – but not always. Sometimes it will draw enemies and opponents

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 61.

in who will want to shut you down. We see that all the time in the movies, don't we? Always in movies when people are moving through hostile territory they are reminded not to build a fire – why? Because the light of the fire draws everything wicked and evil out of the dark. That happened in the Lord of the Rings to Frodo at Weathertop during his journey to Rivendell, do you remember that?

Light ATTRACTS friends and enemies. D.A. Carson says here:

“The righteousness of the life you live will attract attention, even if that attention regularly takes the form of opposition.”²

That's something we are just beginning to rediscover here in the post-Christian west.

So light attracts and then of course light guides.

Everyone understands this part of the metaphor as well. Last Monday night I was in the office a little later than normal because I had to record an interview with someone and as a result, I didn't leave my office until about 6 pm – and no one else was here. There was no one in the front office and George had gone home – so the whole church was dark and I had parked my car out front so I exited from my office through the sanctuary. And at 6 pm in the middle of winter when there are no lights on in the church – it is dangerous in here. So I did what all modern people do – I took out my phone and used that light to guide me around the chairs and the tables and safely out the door.

People in the ancient world were even more aware of the need for guiding light. When the sun went down, the mother in the house would immediately go around and light the lamps – that is essential to Jesus' use of the metaphor. He says:

“Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.” (Matthew 5:15 ESV)

² D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 29.

So at night time, when you light your lamp, you don't put it under a basket, you put it up on a stand so that it can light up as much of the house as possible – that way people can still move around, they can darn socks, sharpen tools or read a book without knocking themselves unconscious on a cupboard door or stubbing their toe on the leg of a chair. That's what light is for! It guides people, it illumines the darkness, it makes the house livable for everyone there.

So light ATTRACTS and light GUIDES.

Putting this all together then, by using these overlapping metaphors Jesus is saying that Christians – his disciples and followers are supposed do 4 things:

- Preserve the world from moral and spiritual decline
- Provide flavour and goodness in an otherwise bland and lifeless context
- Attract – both friends and enemies close enough for us to have conversations
- Guide lost and stumbling people trying to make their way through a dark and dangerous world

That's the job! That's how we are supposed to exercise influence and fulfil our function in the world.

But each of these metaphors comes with a sort of rider attached. Jesus says that for this to work, certain conditions have to be met. So let's talk about that.

What Do These Metaphors Require?

The first thing that these metaphors seem to require is for the church to maintain with the culture.

1. They require the church to maintain contact with the culture

Salt doesn't work if you keep it in the shaker – it has to be APPLIED to the meat. It has to make contact. The same is true for light. If you hide your light under a basket – then it may be shining very brightly, but of course, no one can see it – so these metaphors are encouraging the followers of Jesus Christ to remain in close contact with the people of the world – and that's always been a challenge for us.

As soon as we come to know Jesus and as soon as we discover the beauty and the benefits of the church, we want to lock the door behind us. We want to keep out all the bad people who will ruin it. And of course, as I said a minute ago, we are aware that this light – this beauty – will attract both friends and enemies – so maybe a locked door isn't such a bad idea. Maybe keeping a low profile is the better part of wisdom.

But it's not.

If the goal was to enjoy the benefits of Christ without sharing them – then yes, I could see that – but that isn't the goal. The goal is to enjoy Christ and to SHARE Christ with people from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth – so we need to keep the doors open, we need to keep the drawbridge down and we need to keep the lights on – that is essential to the Christian life and mission.

Again – we didn't have to think much about this in previous generations because not too many people were coming to hurt us here in Canada for being Christians over the last 150 years. But now, all of the sudden, we can hear some scary things out there in the dark. It sounds like maybe there are some bandits out there casing out the joint. It sounds like all of the sudden, we have some enemies who want to shut us down.

So what should we do?

Should we turn the lights off? Let's abandon the metaphor for a second and talk in straight forward terms. Should we stop putting our sermons on the internet now? Should we stop preaching on every verse and every chapter in the Bible? We could do that. You know if we just decided today to skip, like 4 chapters of the Bible, then we could probably live out the rest of our lives in this country in peace. 4 chapters. There are 1189 chapters in the Bible. Who's going to miss 4? So what do you say? Do you want to skip those chapters? Do you want to turn the light off and pretend we're not home?

I think if we do that, we should just shut the whole thing down. Dietrich Bonhoeffer – who knew a few things about enemies and opposition – said this in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. He said:

“Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him.”³

That’s why we read that statement this morning. It was not a call to war – we aren’t declaring war on the culture – we are just expressing our resolve to keep the lights on. We aren’t hiding. We’re still here. And we’d love for you to come on in and have a talk.

If we’re going to be followers of Jesus Christ – if we’re going to be disciples – then we need to maintain welcoming, loving, visible, intentional CONTACT with the culture.

And then secondly, the metaphors used by Jesus here obviously require the church to maintain her distinctive beliefs and practices.

2. They require the church to maintain distinctive beliefs and practices

Light is good because it is so different than darkness and salt is good because it is so different from putrid and decaying meat – that’s the whole idea here. Jesus says:

“if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

If salt becomes adulterated with sand for example, then all you can really use it for is to throw it on the walkway – you definitely can’t use it to preserve or flavour your meat. The metaphor depends on the SALTINESS of the SALT and the LIGHTYNESS of the LIGHT – I realize that “lightyness” isn’t a real word, but you get the point. The influence of the church depends upon her maintaining a sharp contrast with the beliefs and practices of the culture.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1978), 132.

You know, it's interesting because, when I first started out in ministry in 1994 everyone was talking about bridging the gap with the culture. The church was strange and out of touch, everyone was saying, we have to make the church more like the world. Now, some of what people were pushing back on in the late 80's and early 90's wasn't so much "biblical beliefs and practices" as it was a set of ossified, idolatrous cultural preferences. You know, why should we still be reading and praying in Elizabethan English? That's what the King James Bible was – it was the language of Shakespeare – it was the language of our great, great, great grandparents – but nobody understood what we were talking about. Even we didn't understand what we were talking about. And the music! Who decided that 18th century European music was the only godly and appropriate way to worship the Lord? That would have been news to King David in the Old Testament – so the church WAS unhelpfully WEIRD in the late 20th century – but in our rush to make the church more accessible to the culture, I think we may have forgotten that some of the weird is baked into the cake and some of the GAP is actually necessary for the proper preaching of the Gospel.

So to be clear – when we talk about being SALT and maintaining a distinction – we are talking here about maintaining biblical beliefs and Christian practices. We're talking about believing in an all powerful, all Sovereign Creator – in a world where man is the measure of all things. We're talking about believing in a bloody cross in a world where no one thinks that sin is that big a deal. We're talking about maintaining the practice of Christian marriage – instead of just shacking up with whomever, wherever, whenever as is increasingly common in the world. We're talking about reserving the best of our time, talent and treasure for the LORD in a world that is all about pleasure, individualism and self indulgence.

That's what the Bible is referring to here when it talks about maintaining your saltiness. For the church to be the church – for us to be salt, for us to light – we need to maintain our distinctiveness within the world. We have to BELIEVE what we've always believed and we have to PRACTICE the values and disciplines that were handed down to us. To the extent that we do that we will maintain our influence and function within the culture.

So how are we doing with that? That's the million dollar question isn't it?

We're not just supposed to READ the Bible we are supposed to use the Bible as a mirror and to make whatever changes the mirror suggests. The Apostle Paul told his people:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.” (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

So let's do that – let's examine ourselves to see whether the way we are living out our faith in the world aligns with what is being taught and commended here. The first question I think we need to ask is this: are you, are WE, in contact with lost people?

1. Are you/we in contact with lost people?

I remember hearing years ago that it takes the average convert to Christianity 12 years to get to the point where they have no significant relationships with unbelievers. I couldn't find that statistic to verify it but it certainly sounds plausible – and you can easily understand how that might happen. When you come into the church you are immediately made to feel a part of a much wider family. People invite you into their homes, you find that you have so much in common, you like how people talk to each other and treat each other. You get involved in a ministry, you join a small group, you take a class – and on and on it goes until one day you wake up and realize that apart from the members of your own extended family you don't have a significant relationship with a single non-Christian person.

You've accidentally drifted out of your calling.

And it can happen just as easily to entire churches. We can retreat from the world – we can become a country club for the neat and tidy, or a pleasant waiting room for the glories and beauties on the other side. It is so easy for the church that was once a city on a hill to become a village in the valley – still shining the light – but doing it now where no one else can see.

How would you rate yourself on this matter? How would you rate us as a church?

We've spent two years dealing with COVID restrictions – many of them having to do with social distancing and limited indoor gatherings – we've made new habits and many of them are uncondusive to our calling so when this is over, we need to break ourselves of those habits. We need to sit close to unsaved people; we need to breath their air and we need to invite them into our homes because if we aren't in contact with unbelievers – if we aren't in contact with the culture generally – then we aren't fulfilling our calling to be salt and light in the world.

Secondly, we need to consider together whether or not we remain committed to Christian beliefs and practices.

2. Are you/we committed to Christian beliefs and practices?

Of course, there are a lot of Christian beliefs and practices, so mostly I mean: “Are we committed to those Christian beliefs and practices that are going to be difficult and even painful to maintain?”

I don't suspect, for example, that you will have to pay a price for believing in the Trinity over the next 10 years in this culture but I do suspect that we will pay a heavy price for continuing to believe and proclaim what the Bible says about human sexuality and gender.

Will you stand with us on that? Believing that God's design for sexuality and gender may be HARD but it is GOOD.

Will you stand with us on that? Believing that people need to hear the WHOLE GOSPEL – the Gospel that convicts AND the Gospel that encourages? The Gospel that tears down AND the Gospel that builds up.

Will you stand with us on that?

Will you stand with the Scriptures on that? Will you stand with the majority church in places like Africa, Asia and Latin America on that? Or will you compromise and shave off that one edgy, offensive, little bit so that your Christianity can fly beneath the radar of the world?

Oh, that's going to be A HUGE ONE for US as a GATHERED church over the next 10 years – but there are also numerous day to day challenges for us to face as individual followers of Jesus Christ down at street level. So let me get real practical here: Christians are supposed to tell the truth; Christians are supposed to be kind and merciful; Christians are supposed to practice chastity before marriage and glad and happy monogamy within marriage; Christians are supposed to love their enemies; Christians are supposed to live lives of sacrifice and service – so how are we doing with all of that? Those are all beliefs and practices clearly taught in the pages of Holy Scripture – so how are we doing with all of that?

Are you lying about your vaccination status to get your kids into the hockey arena? Are you being rude to the waitress? Are you living with your girlfriend? Are you giving up on your marriage? Are you slandering your social and political enemies online? Are you spending all your money on travel and toys?

Because that's really where the rubber meets the road for us as individual Christians. That's where we shine the light – or where we don't shine the light. That's where we are salty or that's where we are just so much sand.

That kind of difference – that kind of contrast – that kind of example - that's where WITNESS happens; that's where INFLUENCE happens, that's where INVITATION HAPPENS and by the grace of God that's where Gospel conversation will happen as people see and savour and draw near.

That's our mission, brothers and sisters, that's our calling. That's what it means to be SALT and LIGHT in this world.

Oh God, help! Let's pray together.

“Lord Jesus we need your grace to fulfil this mission and calling. We can't do it on our own. In our flesh we know that we will fall back to the mean, we will abandon our distinctiveness, we will hide our light under a bushel, but you have called us to a ministry and an influence in this world. You have called us to preserve, to flavour, to attract and to guide lost and stumbling sinners toward the Saviour. Help us Lord! We want to do that – as individuals, as families and as a church. Bless us Lord! Empower us to do these things for the good of our friends and neighbours and for the glory of our Father who art in heaven. We ask that now in Jesus' name, amen.”