

Sermon on the Mount 1

Introduction, the Beatitudes, salt and light

Over the next few weeks, I would like to take you through the three chapters (5-7) of Matthew's Gospel, known as the Sermon on the Mount. For this morning, I will give an introduction to the Sermon on the Mount and this is necessary to set our minds on the context of what is written here. Then we will look at the Beatitudes and the saying of the salt and light.

Introduction

Some of the teachings in these chapters are well known and often quoted even in non-Christian settings. Below are some examples which are better known.

^{5 13} "You are the salt of the earth;

^{5 37} Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

^{5 39} But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

^{5 44} But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

^{6 3} But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

^{6 24} "No one can serve two masters;

^{6 34} "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

^{7 7} "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

^{7 12} "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

The Sermon on the Mount starts with the beatitudes. Some have interpreted these verses as a formula for happiness. Indeed, the word *makarios* for blessed can certainly be translated as happy, but that is not the point of Jesus' teaching here. If we put the beatitudes in two columns, we will see quite clearly the purpose of the blessing.

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit,	for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn,	for they will be comforted.
⁵ "Blessed are the meek,	for they will inherit the earth.
⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,	for they will be filled.
⁷ "Blessed are the merciful,	for they will receive mercy.
⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart,	for they will see God.
⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers,	for they will be called children of God.
¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,	for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The thrust of the beatitudes is relatedness with the Creator. Jesus taught this to His disciples, not to those outside the Kingdom. It is not a set of do's to inherit what God has promised. It is the way of life for those in the Kingdom. It is kingdom living. It is the way of life for those in the Kingdom of God.

In fact, at many places in the sermon, it does appear that Jesus has set out a prescription for happiness or right living. Here are a few examples.

^{5 19} Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

^{5 22} But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;

^{5 30} And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

^{6 2} “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.

^{6 19} “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

^{7 1} “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.

^{7 24} “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

It is easy to take these chapters as a prescription for right living and many people have done just that thinking that by doing all that is written here it will take them closer to God. That is contractual. Contractual means if one does this, the other will do that in good measure. We cannot come to God with the attitude that if we do this, God will do that in return for us. That is not so because some of what is taught here is impossible to implement. Take for example,

^{6 3} But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

^{5 30} And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

I don't think anyone of us can live up to these teachings. We need to move away from any sense of contractualism in these chapters. Contractualism is nowhere to be found in the bible and certainly not in the way God deals with us. God does not put conditions before us in order to obtain His grace and mercy. If that were to be the case, then grace will no longer be grace. One cannot buy grace or obtain grace by merit.

Jesus did not teach this as a way of entering into the Kingdom of God. It is written to those whom God has brought into the Kingdom. I have organized these chapter under the Lord's prayer. I take this from James Krieg.

Our Father in Heaven: The Beatitudes

Reading: Matthew 5:1-10

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

The Sermon on the Mount is teaching by Jesus. Here, Jesus went up to the mountain, withdrawing from the busy township. The disciples came to Him and He started to teach them. That is why these chapters are called the ‘Sermon on the Mount’. Time taken to withdraw for teaching has been a practice of the church and also of institutions today. Setting aside time to contemplate what Jesus has taught is of course an important part of our Christian spiritual formation.

The Sermon on the Mount is teaching. We know that. It is teaching to show us what life should be in the Kingdom of God. There is a problem in the way we receive teaching. To us, teaching is to the mind. When we receive it, we weigh it up, perhaps critique it and then decide if it sits well with us. That is not the way we come to the teaching here. These are declarative statements of life in the Kingdom. These are statements of the Christian life. We read it and the Spirit brings the truth of these teachings to our hearts. We may wrestle with these teachings but we accept them as God's truth.

We start off with the beatitudes. The word *makarios* is translated 'blessing', 'blessed' or 'happy'. This presents a special difficulty in understanding because this is popularly equated with materialism.

We have come to understand blessing to be something that is favourable to ourselves, like being blessed with a new house or a new job or some kind of a nice facility. Without going into a long dissertation, we may simply say that God blesses in order to equip us to function in the way we are created to be. The blessings of God are spiritual gifts to us to relate with the Creator in the way He wants us to function. It has not much to do with material things or getting on well in life, i.e. secular life. It is blessing to enable us to live this new life in Christ. This then is the true happiness in life, a life that is lived in accordance with the will of the Father and in full dependence on Him through the Son and the Spirit. This has to be the framework with which we approach these teachings.

Blessing is not used primarily in a material sense in the scriptures. It is used in relation to what God has given us in order for us to relate with Him in the way we should, i.e. in trust and full dependence on Him. Paul sets this out clearly in Ephesians.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (Eph. 1:3)

At creation, God blessed Adam and Eve.

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen. 1:27-28)

This blessing is the gift of God to Adam and Eve to enable to function in the way that God intends for them. God blesses to enable us. He does not give a command and leaves us to do the best we can. He is the enabler – to enable us to fulfil those commands.

³ **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**

Pietism often makes much of this verse in order to encourage those who are poor, i.e. in poverty, or those who choose willingly to live a life of poverty, in order for them to enter the kingdom of heaven. This may well be a message relevant for those who live in affluence. However, that is not the point I want to make. It is certainly not the point of what Jesus is teaching here. He is talking to the 'poor in spirit', not simply poor in material things, though some are. He is referring to our spiritual poverty or bankruptcy in a society of plenty. Much of our thinking today is reasoning from a position of affluence. Our morality is from the position of affluence, i.e. what is right is what will preserve our standard of living.

When Jesus started His teaching, He quoted from the prophet Isaiah.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. (Isa. 61:1-3)

This passage from Isaiah may well have paved the way for the beatitudes. The good news, i.e. the gospel, is to the oppressed or the poor. The kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is for the poor in spirit. We, the affluent, who have plenty, do not feel the need for the kingdom of God, because we are so self-sufficient. What we need, we can go out and buy them. We have the money and the resources. There is not much today that we cannot buy, maybe even love, because when you have plenty to give out, everybody loves you, i.e. until you run out of things to give out!

We only need God when we are down or when we are unable to do it ourselves or when we have our backs against the wall. Only then will we fall on our knees and pray and ask. This is the life of dependence on God. This is the life of the kingdom. Sometimes, in God's grace, He brings us to that state in order for us to realise our condition and return to Him. That is the story of the prodigal son. That is why we feel that God is nearer when we are 'poor in spirit' with our backs to the wall. Our affluence is a stumbling block in this new life in Christ. I do not mean to go the way of the pietist in advocating a life of poverty, but when all we want to do in life is to preserve our affluent life style, then that is the stumbling block. We will not be able to see God or hear Him with that mindset. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted

The beatitudes follow a logical sequence. Again, we need to take it from Isaiah,

² ... to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. (Isa. 61:1-3)

Isaiah was writing to the Jews who were captives in Babylon. They had learnt their lesson. They realized the errors of their way in not following the laws of Moses and acknowledging their God and Redeemer. Now, in captivity, they mourn for their sins and they will be comforted. We need to mourn for our sins.

Today, we want to be comforted, but we do not want to mourn for our sins. The good news of the kingdom is our comfort. The good news that our sins have been forgiven is what releases us from our guilt. The good news brings us to our knees in repentance. Our true comfort comes from the good news of the cross where Christ conquered sin and evil in order to bring us back to God.

We have a real problem today in many areas of counselling. It glosses over sin and repentance. It cannot be comfort when we use bandaids to cover a cancer without surgery. There cannot be proper healing of the soul without the doing away of the cancer of sin and evil through the cross. That is the surgery we need and that has been done by our great physician and healer, Jesus Christ. Only then will there be 'garland instead of ashes', 'gladness instead of mourning' and the 'mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit' as Isaiah said. That is our true comfort.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"

Meekness is often equated with weakness. Not so. The Oxford Dictionary defines meek as 'quiet, gentle, and submissive'. To be meek is to know exactly who you are. It is often those who are trying to get to the top that need to tell others how good they are. Those who are there, i.e. at the top, do not have to brag about who they are because they know it and everyone around knows it. At the other end are those who try very hard to avoid any accolades given to them by saying that they are not, but that is what they are. That is a false humility.

Paul wrote of the criticism levied at him by others.

⁹ but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

This can only come about to the person who has been justified through the cross. The person who can say this is one who knows who he or she is before God. It is the person who has mourned for sins and is one with Christ and knows that. And so just as Christ is the creator of all heaven and earth, such a person will inherit the earth through union with Christ. It is not a promise to wealth, but a promise of our eternal inheritance in Christ. This is a relational statement rather than a material one.

When we have the assurance of our status in Christ, then we can say with Paul, 'Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ'. When those things happen to us, there is no need to hit back or to justify oneself because we know who we are and what we are doing as we are doing the will of the Lord. That is the true meekness.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled"

Righteousness may be a legal term, but in the scriptures, it is a relational term. It was said of Abraham that 'he believes in the Lord and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'. He did not earn it by deeds that he accomplished. In fact, there was not much. He made many errors because of weakness and self-interest. That was not counted against him. I am not saying that we can ignore what is ethical, but when we try and fail, there is another chance. That is called grace and our God is a gracious God.

Jesus met the needs of those who hunger by feeding them with bread. He met the need of the thirsty Samaritan woman by getting water from the well for her. He promised her the living water. The bread is symbolic of Himself. The living water is a symbol of the Spirit. If we were to mourn over our sins, we will be hungering and thirsting for Christ and the Spirit to fill our lives. This is the longing of those who are 'poor in spirit' and belong to the kingdom of heaven. And be assured, they will be filled.

The first four beatitudes have to do with our relationship with God. I want you to read them in the relational framework. It is not a condition to receive the Father's blessing, but a statement of the gift of God to us. It is the expression of who we are in Christ.

These next four have to do with our relationship with others. However, the latter four beatitudes flow from our relationship with God. It is with these last four beatitudes that the relational model I have given becomes very helpful.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy

This is the corollary to the first beatitude, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. They are spiritually bankrupt and depended on the mercy of God to bring them into the Kingdom of heaven. Mercy has to be distinguished from grace. Mercy has to do with the result of sin, such as pain, misery and distress. Grace deals with sin and guilt itself. The Oxford Dictionary defines mercy as compassion or forgiveness shown towards an enemy or offender in one's power. It is related to forgiveness. However, mercy extends relief, grace pardons. Mercy cures, heals and helps. Grace cleanses and reinstates.

This beatitude is a difficult one to expound because for all intents and purposes, this is a contractual statement. It is difficult not to understand it as such. We are to be merciful in order for us to receive mercy from God or from others. Matthew has often been quoted to argue the contractual interpretation.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:14-15)

I will explain what Matthew wrote here a little later. I want to argue that the contractual interpretation is wrong and cannot be sustained theologically and not even sociologically or philosophically. It can only be contractual if we assume that within the human person, there is this reservoir of love and grace. This is the doctrine of the intrinsic goodness of humanity, or as taught by the Chinese primer, humanity is created good. If that were so, then there is no need for the cross. There will be no need for redemption. If we take away the doctrine of original sin, then Christendom will be no more. This is because we would not need Christ. We would not need redemption. This is taught by the Unitarian church and by liberal Christianity. Christ becomes a mere helper to what we are doing, and is dispensable, i.e. when we can manage on our own and don't need him.

Sociologically, we know that we cannot teach love or get someone to show love when the person has not experienced love. How is it possible for someone to demonstrate a character trait that one has not experienced apart from sin? Sin is the natural human pathway and mercy and forgiveness are foreign entities in that pathway. This cannot be understood in the contractual mode. No way.

The only way we can understand this is by the model shown here – the relational model. It is only when we have received mercy that we are able to show mercy. The story of the unforgiving servant is often quoted to argue against the relational model. But that is not the point of the story (Matt. 18:23-35). The servant had received mercy, but he did not show mercy to others. It was for this that he was punished.

In the Lord's prayer which we will talk in some detail later, we seek the forgiveness from God before we are able to forgive our debtors. And it is in this context that Matthew wrote verses 14-15.

¹² ... And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors. ...

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt. 6:12-15)

Before I finish with this beatitude, I want to add further that these are only possible with the Triune God. The Father's purpose is fulfilled by the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in bringing us to the state where we receive the blessings of God.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God

This is the corollary to the second beatitude, ‘Blessed are they that mourn’. God is holy and we cannot approach Him unless we are holy. But holiness is not something we can attain to ourselves. It is only when we have mourned for our sins and received the forgiveness of God that we can be pure in heart. We may think that we can make ourselves pure by certain actions or by abstinence. No, we can't. We are sinners and helpless to make ourselves clean. We may think that we are pure in heart, but the prophet Jeremiah thinks otherwise. He wrote,

⁹The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?

¹⁰I the LORD test the mind
and search the heart, ... (Jer. 17:9-10)

How then can we be pure in heart? David, in his penitential psalm, made this clear.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me. (Ps. 51:10)

A pure heart is the work of God. Only then can we see God and see His ways. This is the blessing of God. This is the gift of God to us.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God

This is the corollary to the third beatitude, ‘Blessed are the meek’. We are called to be peacemakers. This is not easily attainable because we are a fallen people. There will be conflict. Conflict is the result of different frameworks, value system and priorities. There are conflicts in our families, between parents and children, between husbands and wives, and between friends. Yet we are called to live peaceably. Yet to live peaceably does not mean that we put away our values for the sake of peace. That is ‘cheap peace’. It cannot be real peace. Real peace is the result of the work of Christ in each of our hearts. Only then is there true reconciliation to God and to each other as we all become subject to God. It is then that there is reconciliation of our different frameworks in seeing things. Paul wrote,

¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Cor. 5:18-19)

We are not the primary peacemakers, as if we can make peace. Christ is the primary peacemaker because He reconciled the world to the Father. We are the secondary peacemakers, if I may use that term. We proclaim the message of reconciliation. We point to Christ, the peacemaker. But we ourselves need to be reconciled to God in the first place and if that is so, then that is why we are called the children of God who have inherited the earth. Only then can we make the peace with others and not before. Without the cross any peace would be merely bandaid treatment. It only holds until the bandaid comes off. Our world history shows that whether we have the League of Nations or the United Nations or World Trade Centre, these bodies are in perpetual conflict within themselves.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is the corollary to the fourth beatitude. This is a hard one to accept. None of us would call ourselves blessed when we are persecuted. But this is part of the process we need to bring us into the kingdom of God. This is the persecution we had to have.

Luther gave to us the three processes in coming to the study of the word of God. They are *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (study and meditation) and *tentatio* (persecution or suffering). We gladly adopt the first two but not the last. We reject and avoid the last. The *tentatio* is part of the deal and we cannot do without.

Geoffrey Bingham wrote this in his book, *Love is the Spur*.

The conclusion I have come to is that what happened in Kranji is that we learned how to live and how to die after the man of true love, this is, Jesus of Nazareth. We must never be ashamed of what we learned and the fact that we needed to learn it as POWs.¹

The weakness of the church is that we live in affluence and have ourselves protected and fortified against any persecution. We want to cut out the *tentatio*. We think that if only we can do the right thing, all will be well. There will never be ‘the right thing’ because everyone comes with a different perspective and framework. That is why our reconciliation to the Father and incorporation into the body of Christ as one is so essential an act. That can only come through the cross and the gospel. Therefore, persecution there will be because with the gospel comes persecution, when ‘people revile us ... and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely’ because we stand for Christ. As we live in the will of God and do the things that God has put in our hearts to do, others will misunderstand us because they are not us. They may have a different perspective. We do not blame them. We can explain to them but we cannot make them see things our way all the time. We have to live with that. Despite that, we can have the peace of God in us. That is part of our transformation and we are blessed. This differentiates the people of God from adherents who flee the church at the slightest criticism.

Let us not strive to earn the blessings of God. You can’t. We come into the blessings of God as we come to cross and be reconciled with Him. All the blessings or enabling of God are in Christ and it is only through Him that we are blessed. So, rest in Him.

Let me finish with a quotation from John Stott.

Looking back, we can see that the first four beatitudes reveal a spiritual progression of relentless logic. Each step leads to the next and presupposes the one that has gone before. To begin with, we are to be ‘poor in spirit’, acknowledging our complete and utter spiritual bankruptcy before God. Next, we are to ‘mourn’ over the cause of it, our sins, yes, and our sins too – the corruption of our fallen nature, and the reign of sin and death in the world. Thirdly, we are to be ‘meek’, humble and gentle towards others, allowing our spiritual poverty (admitted and bewailed) to condition our behaviour to them as well as to God. And fourthly we are to ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’. For what is the use of confessing and lamenting our sins, of acknowledging the truth about ourselves to both God and men, if we leave it there? Confession of sin must lead to hunger for righteousness. (John Stott, p. 46)

Hallowed be your name: Salt and Light

Reading: Matthew 5:11-16; John 9:1-7

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *Love is the Spur*, (NSW: Eyrie Books, 2004), 134.

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, 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 in heaven.

I have spoken much against contractualism, and I have admitted that oftentimes I have fallen back onto the contractual framework. That is our default position when we are caught unaware. That is our fallen nature. Perfectionism is an ideal and we cannot reach that state. There is so much that our fallen culture has perverted us that we need this corrective. However, it is not merely an ethical corrective, but a corrective that starts in the heart because of Calvary. We would have missed the point totally if we see the Sermon on the Mount as merely teachings to set our values right. I also want to remind you of the model we need to use in coming to grips with Scripture. It is the relational model. Yes, the teachings do reset our values, but they go further. These teachings are declarative statements of the life in Christ because He has set our hearts right through the cross.

Having begun with the blessings, Jesus continues with the imagery of salt and light. They are straightforward because they are common issues. We use salt every day and we know all about salt. It adds to the taste and it is also a preservative. Light is what we are aware of everyday from dawn to dusk. Jesus started with a simple straightforward statement. You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world.

Very often we come to these passages and our first inclination is to ask how can we become the salt or how can we be the light? Alternatively, we may ask how can we show that we are salt and light? The first is quite ridiculous. The second is quite permissible.

There is a ‘how’ question in the film *The Sound of Music*. In desperation, the nuns asked the question, how do you solve a problem like Maria? And the answer is a counter question, how do you catch a cloud and pin it down? In short, there are many things in life where we do not have an answer. So, what do you do with Maria? You simply accept her and love her. It is not a methodological solution but a relational solution.

The Salt of the Earth

Salt is used of the covenant.

You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt. (Lev. 2:13)

19 All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to the LORD I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual due. It is a covenant of salt forever before the LORD for you and for your offspring with you.” (Num. 18:19)

Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth. He is obviously talking to those who are already the salt of the earth. That which is not salt – sodium chloride – cannot make themselves sodium chloride. There is a way for that which is not salt to become salt. That is by a force acting from without. There is a way to turn lead into gold and that is by an almighty force by a machine called the Linear Accelerator, changing the configuration of its molecules, i.e. the protons and electrons. And that force that turns sinners into the salt of the world is by the work of Christ on the cross. It is done for us – a force from without and not by our own effort.

Salt cannot lose its saltiness. Saltiness is the intrinsic property of salt. It is the property of sodium chloride to be salty. The only way salt can lose its saltiness is by contaminants which then react with it and change its nature, i.e. it is no longer sodium chloride. That is the danger

for us as the people of God. We lose our distinctiveness as the redeemed people and be like the rest of the world. If we allow secularism to react with us then that will cause us to cease to be God's holy people. We then lose our saltiness.

The Sermon on the Mount is not a 'how-to' sermon. Jesus is talking to the disciples. They are the salt of the earth because they are in Christ. Neither should we take these teachings as something that we need to attain to. For example, we say that now that we are in Christ, I need to salt the earth and to make an impact. The salt does not need to say that. It simply needs to remain as salt.

Salt not only add to the taste, it also functions as a preservative. This function was much more important to people in Jesus' days than in ours. They did not have refrigerators and the way to keep meat is to add salt to them. That stops the degradation of the meat. The analogy is used to highlight this function of the church. Christianity is not a private personal religion where we keep to ourselves. We are to herald the good news, i.e. preach the gospel. We are to rub shoulders with a decadent society, like rubbing salt into a wound to clean it. People will not like it and that is why so often the church is told publicly to stay out of politics and other areas. People will not like what we say. That is why Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

The Light of the World

"I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for the nations,
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isa. 42:6-7)

The second imagery that Jesus used is light. It is also of the covenant, 'a covenant for the people, a light for the nations'. Jesus says that we are the light of the world. But before we get too carried away with that description of what we are, we need to see first of all that the Light of the world is Jesus Himself. He says, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12, 9:5). However, Jesus added a time factor here. He says, 'While I am in the world, I am the light of the world'.

So, we are not the true light. John the Baptist made it clear that he was not the true light. Our light cannot do the work of reconciliation and restoring the people of God. We need to point them to the true light.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:6-9)

The function of light is simple. It dispels darkness and enables us to see. It is also a force that shows up corruption and deceit because those things are done behind closed doors and hidden from others. Light brings those issues into the open where everyone can see.

The light that we shine is a reflected light. However, so often our light is eclipsed by the world when we let the world stand right between us and God. So, you see, our action is not the light. Others might think so. If that is all that we hold out to people then we will disappoint them in time because sooner or later they will see our imperfections and then the light dims. While they may see our actions, we need to reflect the light of God to them, i.e. to present to them the true light, Jesus Christ. Then when our imperfection dims the light, this will be counteracted by the brightness of the light of Christ. When the light of Christ shines brightly, the dimness of our lights is not seen. But if our light is the only light available, then its dimness matters immensely.

It is the same with those in leadership positions. Our task is to point others to the light of Christ. If all that you see is my light, you will be very disappointed. We need to look to Him. That is why Jesus also said, 'In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5:16). What happens when they see our good works? They glorify the Father in heaven. There is a failure to see beyond the works of people. We have failed to enable them to see and glorify the Father in heaven. That is the purpose of our light before people. It is not to direct the glory to ourselves, but to the Father in heaven who has blessed us with all good gifts so that we may live the lives that He has purposed for us.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you that you have redeemed us and sustained us. You have kept us and blessed us with all the abundance of your grace in Christ. Forgive us as we so often think that we are on our own and need to bring things to fruition when all the time you are telling us to rest on in your grace. Forgive us for all the times when we fail to see the way that you are leading us. Enable us dear Lord to hearken to your voice. Enable us to ride along the jet stream that your Spirit has created rather than to continue to peddle along the path we created for ourselves. May you bless and keep us this week as we continue with our various vocations. Amen.