

Matthew 5:13-16

How to Function as Subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven

Ye are the salt of the earth...v. 13; Ye are the light of the world...v. 14

One of the greatest challenges a Christian faces in our culture of affluence and ease is the challenge of functioning in the world while being separated from the world. In contemplating such a challenge, I'm afraid that all too often the Christian becomes guilty, at least in his thinking, of swinging to one extreme or another. One extreme says that the only valid activities a Christian should be involved in are spiritual activities. If you're doing anything other than praying, witnessing, or reading your Bibles – then you've become worldly – that's one extreme. There is no such thing according to this mindset as using the things of the world without abusing them. There's no such thing as seeing God's hand giving us all things richly to enjoy.

The other extreme which I feel is much more common today is to give yourself over to the world to the point where you don't devote yourself to any spiritual exercises at all. A man considers his chief end to be to entertain and amuse himself and seek pleasures for evermore. And things like prayer and worship and Bible reading become painful chores that can be all too readily set aside. The motto of this extreme is *What's wrong with this – or what's wrong with that*. He's devoted to justifying worldly actions more than he's devoted to seeking Christ or sanctifying what he does unto Christ.

In this portion of the sermon on the mount I believe we find the Lord Jesus giving some very clear guidelines that pertain to meeting this challenge – i.e. the Lord is addressing how the subjects of the kingdom of heaven are to function in the world. In the beatitudes we find the true subject of the kingdom of heaven described. Commentators, generally speaking, find in the beatitudes a description of Christian character. In vv. 13-16 we find a shift in our Lord's focus from the character of the Christian to the way such a Christian is to function in the world.

I think it's important to keep in mind that there is a connection between the beatitudes and vv. 13-16. If the beatitudes describe you – if the spiritual experience we've traced through the beatitudes is your experience then it will follow that the subjects of the kingdom of heaven will function in this world in a certain way. *Ye are the salt of the earth v. 13 – Ye are the light of the world – v. 14*.

The connection between these verses and the beatitudes is such that the beatitudes become the qualification for the statements that follow in v. 13 and v. 14. How do you become the salt of the earth? – you must be poor in spirit, you must mourn over sin, you must be meek. How do you become the light of the world? – you must hunger and thirst for righteousness – you must be merciful – you must strive for purity – you must be a peacemaker and you must be one who will endure come what may.

These are the ones who function as salt and light. These are the ones who rise to the challenge of knowing how to function in this sin cursed world as subjects of the kingdom

of heaven. This is what I'd like to draw your attention to today – this theme of functioning in the world as the subjects of the kingdom of heaven.

How do We Function in this World as Subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven?

I want to leave with you today a simple analysis of these verses that I hope will enable you to know how you are to function as a subject of the kingdom of heaven. If you can come to a right understanding of these verses it should enable you to rise to the challenge of knowing how to be in the world without being of the world.

I. The Description of Our Function

I like what one commentator notes about these verses when compared to Gen. 12:2. In that verse Abraham was told by God that he would be blessed of God and that he would also be a blessing. In similar fashion we may note that in the beatitudes we're told that we'll be blessed of God and in these verses we're studying today we learn that we too will also be a blessing. This is the meaning of being salt and shining as lights.

These two images of salt and light used by the Lord approach the matter of being a blessing from two different perspectives. You might call one of these perspectives a preventative function and you could call the other perspective a proactive function or a promoting function. Another way to view them would be to call one of the perspectives a defensive function while the other one is an offensive function. Just as in war or in a sporting event you find one of the teams having to defend a goal while the other team tries to score or advance so do these two functions come to play in the kingdom of heaven.

One commentator actually describes these perspectives as presenting a conservative perspective and a liberal perspective. The Christian is to be both a conservative and a liberal. You can tell this commentator wrote in a different time period than our modern day. Today these two terms are used, it seems, mostly in politics and are viewed as being mutually exclusive of each other. You're either a conservative or a liberal but you can't be both – so the political reasoning goes.

The commentator who used these terms, however, wasn't thinking in terms of politics so much as he was thinking in terms of the literal meaning of the two terms. To be a conservative means that there are certain things that you endeavor to conserve. To be a liberal means that there are certain things that you give or contribute and that you do so with great liberality or with great generosity. The true meaning of being a liberal is to be one who gives generously. You may recall from James 1:5 we're told that *if any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.* The problem in our day is that this generosity in the realm of politics has come to be at the expense of others. It's very easy to be generous with someone else's money.

In the spiritual realm – being conservative, or being preventative, or being defensive corresponds to being the salt of the earth. Salt, you see, was rubbed into meat in order to

prevent the corruption or the decaying of that meat. The image our Lord uses, therefore, carries with it a very important implication that isn't too hard to discern. The implication is that the world, left to itself, will always move in the direction of corruption. Bible history records several examples of this.

Following the fall of man it doesn't take long before we read in Gen. 6:5 *And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.* A few verses later in vv. 11,12 we read *The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt: for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.*

This corruption is what led to the flood. But not even a universal flood could drive the corruption from man. And so not long after the flood you have the account of man's conspiracy against God in the building of the tower of Babel. Men, left to themselves, will move in the direction of corruption.

The Christian's task is to prevent this corruption by functioning the same way salt functions – to prevent the spread of corruption. He does this by being distinct from the world. He is, in the words of Rom. 12, to be transformed by the renewing of his mind rather than being conformed to the thinking and ethics of the world.

It is certainly in connection with this function as salt that the subject of the kingdom of heaven denounces what is sinful and contends for what is good. I think you could say that it is in keeping with this function of preventing corruption that we should heed Paul's exhortation to Timothy to pray for those who have authority over us. It is in keeping with this function of salt that we inform and involve ourselves in the world around us so that we can endeavor to promote righteousness and stem the flood tide of iniquity.

When you think of those who take it upon themselves to protest abortion or when you think of those that do something as simple as sign a petition put out by the American Family Association in connection with some sinful practice being endorsed by businesses then you're thinking in terms of the Christian's function as salt.

It seems like a daunting task at times that can be very discouraging especially when we see the forces of corruption having so much strength and being so relentless in their promotion of sin. What must be borne in mind, however, is that salt represents only one of the perspectives regarding the Christian's mission. He's also to function as light. *Ye are the light of the world* – v. 14. It is this function, at the end of the day, that will gain the victory and advance the kingdom of Christ.

It's not enough, you see, to withstand the forces of wickedness – those forces must be overcome. And it's the light that dispels the darkness. It's the light that puts the forces of wickedness to flight. Have you ever entered a dark room and turned on the light and then beheld as the fleeing insects scatter and search for a place to hide? It's the light that sends them scurrying about trying to find some dark corner in which to hide.

I love the statement that John makes in his gospel with regard to Christ when he says in Jn. 1:5 *And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.* The verse could literally read *and the darkness overcame it not.* The darkness does not conquer the light – but light conquers the darkness.

Christ, of course, is the light of the world. But that light is to shine upon us and to shine through us. And the closer the subjects of the kingdom keep to their king – then the more the light of their countenance will shine. Remember the connection to the beatitudes. I think we could say by way of summary that it is as the children of God manifest humility and submission to their king – and as they strive for righteousness and purity and enter into the light of fellowship with Christ – then the more they'll be enabled to heed Christ's exhortation in v. 16 to *Let your light so shine before men.*

This is the two-fold function, then of the subjects of the kingdom of heaven. Both are equally important. Both must work together. We must function as salt to prevent corruption and we must function as light to promote the gospel of the kingdom.

Would you think with me next on:

II. The Importance of These Functions

The words of Christ following His pronouncement that *ye are the salt of the earth* are words that ought to bring great humility and lamentation upon the church of Christ today. The words of Joel 1:14 come to mind in which the Israelites are exhorted to *Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the LORD your God, and cry unto the LORD.*

I'm afraid that this needs to be the action we take when we hear Christ say in v. 13 *if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast, out, and to be trodden under foot of men.*

It is not difficult in a day like ours to identify sin and denounce it. We've seen Isaiah's words literally come to pass in our day that good is called evil and evil is called good. Sin is sanctioned and righteousness is banned. And in these wicked times the easiest thing to adopt is an "us and them" mentality. In other words – it's the world that espouses and promotes wickedness. You and I don't have anything to do with it. It's the world that sanctions the most abominable things and treats them as virtuous. You and I don't sanction what the world sanctions.

And so Christians find a way to excuse themselves from the culture and climate of sin and iniquity. *It's not our fault and I'm not a part of it* we say to ourselves. Unfortunately our Lord's words indicate to us that we do share in the blame for widespread corruption. We have to sadly acknowledge that to a greater degree than we realize it is the church's failure to function as salt that has enabled corruption to spread and become so deeply entrenched in our land.

If the salt have lost his savour – our Lord says in v. 13. And if we're honest I'm afraid that we must acknowledge that the salt has lost its savour. Salt, you see, is suppose to have

a savour all its own. And the lesson from the image is too plain to miss that the Christian is to have a savour of his own – i.e. the Christian is suppose to be distinct from the world. Now it doesn't take a whole lot of discernment to conclude that in our day the church has lost it's distinction from the world and has adopted the devil's lie that the best way to win the world is to become like the world. And so the savour of the world has come to fill our churches.

The church today sounds like the world and looks like the world and smells like the world. Christians today have adopted the world's standards of immodesty and immorality. It's not particularly difficult to let down our guard when it comes to honesty and integrity because we live in a world that is filled with dishonesty and a lack of integrity.

Being the light of the world has come to mean the neon lights of commercialism or the stage lights of a rock concert or the spot lights that are turned upon Hollywood celebrities and sports figures who as often as not have little to show for their professions of faith, so-called, but are set forth anyway because of the mindset that says that in order for Christ to increase and the church to grow – His name must be carried by others whose names are increased in their celebrity status.

And in such a culture of corruption within the church do we wonder why the gospel seems so powerless? Do we wonder why the sins of the world can all be found in the church? Do we wonder why a generation of young people would cast off such religion and give themselves wholly to the world? Do we wonder why the church would be abandoned by so many that have the spiritual well-being of their families in view?

Judgment must begin at the house of God – Peter tells us in his first epistle (4:17). And the matter becomes even more solemn when we hear our Lord say – *if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.*

Such solemn words would seem to indicate to us that the church is beyond salvaging when it degenerates to the point that it has lost its savour. We must, then, begin with judgment at the house of God. And in the Lord's grace we are given the task of judging ourselves. *For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged* – Paul writes in 1Cor. 11:31.

Let each one, then, examine himself and in that examination ask yourselves not so much whether or not you've gone along with the world's sins – I would expect that as Christians you wouldn't – but ask yourselves, rather – have I succeeded in functioning as salt? Have I had any impact in preventing or restraining the corruption of the world? Have I cried or sighed to God with regard to abominations of my day – or do I find it easier just to go with the flow and take my ease in my own little comfort zone?

The words of Christ certainly magnify the importance of our functions as salt and light. It is Christ who says that our failure to function the way we should makes us good for nothing. May we be moved, then, to take the words of Christ to heart and to seek Him for the empowering grace we need to function as we ought.

It remains for us to consider in our analysis of our function:

III. The Aim Behind Our Function

It is very apparent from the words of Christ in vv. 14 & 15 that His aim for His people is that they be visible. *A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid* – He says in v. 14. *Men do not light a candle, and put it under a bushel* – He says in v. 15.

This certainly disposes the notion that may have appeal to us at times which is the notion that we can surround ourselves by building up walls around us and then from our own little monasteries and say to the world – *you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone*. There is no such thing as peaceful co-existence between the light and the darkness and Christ never intended for His followers to be out of sight.

His design, rather, is that His people be seen. *Let your light so shine before men* – He says in v. 16 *that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven*. Christ's aim in having His people conspicuously visible is that His subjects may in turn lead others to glorify God. When you understand the Lord's purpose in making His people visible in order to lead others to glorify God it may also explain why the Lord sees fit to expose His people, at times, to difficult challenges.

I'm reminded of Paul's words in 1Cor. 4:9 *For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men*. The word *spectacle* means *a public show*. The Lord's purpose in Paul was that he be made a public show, as it were, so that others may see that in spite of his beatings and scourgings and imprisonments and shipwrecks he could still shine brightly for Christ. He could still radiate the joy and peace that were his portion.

This is what the Lord desires for you and me. He sets us on display – not as those who lead easy lives and therefore are able to demonstrate joy and peace. Anybody can demonstrate joy and peace who lives an easy life – but the Lord's aim in our lives is that others may see in us that we shine – no matter what our circumstances are. We stand true to our convictions no matter how unpopular those convictions are.

It seems like an impossible task to perform for the Lord, doesn't it? And in our own strength it is impossible. It seems that our function within the kingdom of heaven is quite beyond us. But again I call to your minds the thing that the Lord Jesus emphasized in the beatitudes – the fact that the subjects of His kingdom are blessed. It's important to remember that we're in the same sermon that Christ preached. There is a connection between the parts of His sermon. We must be aware of the danger of so dividing the sermon that we overlook the connection between the parts.

And so we can see that we will only function within the kingdom of heaven the way we ought to function in accordance with our understanding and appreciation of the simple and sublime truth that we are blessed as the people of God. We are blessed with God's favor. We are clothed with Christ's righteousness. We are convinced that we are indeed the subjects of Christ's kingdom. We know that Christ is with us and for us. We are at peace

with God through Him. We've experienced the humility of being poor in spirit – we've mourned and still mourn over our sins – but we've also been filled with the joy and peace of knowing that there is no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus. We enjoy a standing with God that is based on Christ's righteousness being imputed to us.

And in accordance with our blessings we function as the salt of the earth. In accordance with our blessings we are the light of the world. I wonder, then, today as we bring the meeting to a close – do you understand your function as a subject of the kingdom of heaven? You are to be distinct from the world. In your distinction you will be enabled to conserve what is good and restrain what is corrupting. You are to shine as a light to dispel the darkness of the world. Christ's exhortation to you is that you let your light so shine that others may see your good works and be moved to glorify God.

The importance of your function can hardly be overemphasized. Apart from being the salt of the earth and the light of the world we become valueless to our Lord and valueless to men. We must rise to the occasion of serving our purpose in the kingdom of heaven and God's aim for us is not that we be hidden but that we be visible demonstrations of the power of Christ's love.

It is a daunting and impossible task that we're called upon to fulfill – but the success of it is within our reach – all we need do is reckon upon our blessedness in Christ. May the Lord empower us then in the knowledge and appreciation of His blessings to heed His exhortation and let our lights so shine that others may see our good works and glorify our Father which is in heaven.