

Salt and Light

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] We are working our way through Matthew's Gospel in our morning service just now, and we've come to chapters 5, 6 and 7, which I think I have to say are three of the most important chapters in the whole Bible.

And there are certain passages in the Bible that you would really be wise to just have a good familiarity with.

Passages like Romans 8, which contain so many of the amazing promises that are Irish in Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, 6 and 7, is like that.

It's a section of scripture that we really need to know incredibly well. And the reason for that is because this chapter is describing what life should be like as a disciple of Jesus.

This whole sermon is setting out what life in God's kingdom is meant to be. And Jesus outlines the kind of characteristics, the kind of priorities, the kind of lifestyle that he expects of his people.

[1 : 0 8] And it's really important to recognize that. The Sermon on the Mount does not tell us how to become a Christian. The Sermon on the Mount tells us how to live as Christians.

And it's got so much to teach us about all the different aspects of a Christian living. This year in St. Columbus, we have made 2020 a year of encouragement.

And that means that we want over the next 12 months for you all to be really encouraged as followers of Jesus. In particular, we're focusing on the three areas.

You can see the bottom of the slide. We're talking, encouraging us to talk to one another, but even more so to talk to God in prayer, encouraging one another in our Christian walk as we, you all have to head off to work and you need tomorrow and all the pressures and difficulties that may bring responsibilities at home or challenges of old age.

We want to encourage you as you walk through your daily lives as Christians. But we also want to encourage us, encourage you to share your faith. And it's that aspect of our year of encouragement that our passage today is focusing on because we're coming to verses 13 to 16 of Matthew 5, which in many ways are all about our witness as Christians to the world around us.

[2 : 3 4] Jesus said, you are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

You're the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, 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. In 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.

Last Sunday morning, we were looking at the famous section at the start of the Sermon on the Mount called the Beatitudes, which you can see from verse 2 down to verse 12, which is a section of scripture that really highlights the character traits that God is looking for in his kingdom.

He's not looking for people who are strong, tough, powerful, ruthless. He's looking for people who are meek, who are merciful, who are peacemakers.

And in so many ways, the characteristics that Jesus admires are the very opposite to the characteristics that the world around us admires.

[3 : 42] I think a great example of this is you could title it for all the Beatitudes. A great example is the one verse 7 where it says, blessed are the merciful. So I want you to imagine that you're looking for a promotion and you're looking at an advert for a promotion in your company or another company to a management position and you see a list of characteristics that they're looking for.

Would you ever see the word merciful in those characteristics? No, you wouldn't. But now you imagine that something goes horrendously wrong at work tomorrow.

What is the one thing that a good boss will be in that situation? They'd be merciful. And here's where we see one of many, many ways in which what Jesus prioritizes is so different to the world around us and also so, so much better.

And at the heart of this new life that Jesus is calling us into is that word blessed. You see that it says it again and again and again through the Beatitudes there.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. And that's a really fascinating word. At a very simple level, you'll often hear it said that to be blessed means to be happy.

[5 : 06] And there is a lot of overlap there. But I think that I would want to say that blessed is much, much, much, much bigger than just happiness.

It speaks more of being in a position of incredible privilege, security, peace and contentment.

It's a position that comes from being in a covenant relationship with God, where we are God's special people and we enjoy all the incredible blessings that that can bring.

And what I want us to notice is that that word blessed is pointing us all the way back to one of the most important passages of the Bible, way back in Genesis. So if Matthew 5, 6 and 7 is really important, Genesis 12 is also incredibly important.

And Don read that passage for us in Genesis 12, 1 to 3. In this passage, God is coming to a man called Abraham, whose name was later changed to Abraham, you may have heard of.

[6 : 09] And God comes to him and says, I am going to be your God and you and your descendants are going to be my people. And a key part of God's initial promise to Abraham is that Abraham is going to be blessed.

So God says to him, go from your country and your kindred in your father's house to a land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great.

Abraham and all his descendants are going to be blessed. They're going to enjoy many, many extraordinary privileges from being in a relationship with God.

All of that is a kind of shadow of the blessings that we have in Jesus Christ. And now by faith, we share in all these blessings through our relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

That's emphasized by Paul in Galatians chapter 3 where he says, No then, that it's those who are of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preach the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, In you all the nations shall be blessed.

[7 : 17] So then those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. So basically what that's saying is that just as God promised to bless Abraham way back in Genesis 12.

Now through faith in Jesus Christ, we enjoy that same blessing. But there's something else really important that gets emphasized in Genesis 12.

And this is what I want us to notice. Not only will Abraham himself be blessed along with his family, but they are going to be a blessing to the rest of the world.

You see that at the end. It says, I will bless those who bless you. In him who dishonours you, I will curse in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

And so Israel in the Old Testament, the descendants of Abraham, whilst they enjoyed many blessings themselves at the same time, they were always meant to be a blessing to others, a light to which all the other nations of the world could look.

[8 : 22] And now in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus is describing life in his kingdom, which is effectively the new Israel and exactly the same principle applies. So what I'm trying to say is this, we as disciples are immensely blessed.

But it's also essential that we are a blessing to others in the world around us. And that's part of the reason why I think Jesus follows exactly the same pattern in the Sermon of the Mount.

He talks all about the blessings that we have in the Beatitudes. And then in verse 13, he goes on to talk about the impact that we are to make on the world. We as Christians are to be a blessing.

We are to be like salt and we are to be like a light. And here we discover the fundamental truths that lie at the heart of our witness as disciples.

So if you think about this week ahead as a Christian, you think, well, I want to witness to my colleagues, I want to witness to my family, I want to witness to my friends. What's Jesus asking you to do? Well, that's what I want us to look at together today.

[9 : 36] Jesus uses two metaphors. The first is salt. So as disciples, we are meant to be salt. And what does that mean? What's Jesus getting at? Well, we could spend a lot of time focusing on the properties of salt itself.

I've heard one or two sermons that kind of focus on salt and talk about it as it's white and it's this and it's that. And there's lots of lessons arising from the properties of salt.

And that's all very helpful to think about that. But what I want us to do is actually just look at that verse, verse 13, and try and think about the kind of main message that that verse is conveying to us.

Whenever you go to a verse in the Bible, it's always good to ask yourself the question, what's the key word in that verse? It isn't always one, but very often there is. So look at verse 13, ask yourself, what is the key word in that verse?

And I'll give you a clue. It's not salt. I think the key word in that verse is saltiness.

[10 : 41] And that may sound a bit nitpicky, but it's important to recognize that the emphasis in Jesus's words is not so much on the salt, but it's on the saltiness of the salt.

And the point he's trying to make is that it's the distinctiveness of the salt that is most important, the taste, the saltiness of the salt is what makes it effective.

And without it, salt stops being effective and it's ultimately useless. And here, Jesus is highlighting what is really the main point running through the whole Sermon on the Mount, the fact that as disciples, we are to be different.

And that's why the Sermon on the Mount is so relevant, because today, living as a disciple of Jesus means being different from the world around us, as emphasized by all that Jesus is saying here.

It's our saltiness that distinguishes us from the rest of the world. And the key point is that saltiness is unmistakable. Those of you who eat porridge, if you don't put salt in porridge, you notice it's very, very noticeable.

[11 : 49] As disciples, our distinctiveness should be unmistakable. In other words, people should be able to tell that we're different. We should be bearing witness to that fact in our lives.

And of course, the key question is, well, how do we do that? And we'll come to that in a moment. The other thing that Jesus is highlighting in this verse is that we need to protect our saltiness, because if it's lost, then how can it be restored?

If you were to go back and read through the Old Testament, you'd see that Israel repeatedly lost its saltiness. It was this chosen nation there to be different, to stand out from the rest of the world.

But again and again and again, they decided they saw other countries and thought, oh, let's do what they're doing. Let's copy them. Let's follow them. And as a result, they lost their distinctiveness.

And we face exactly the same temptation. So when someone hurts you, the world says, get them back. Disciples have to be different.

[12 : 53] When you're attracted to someone, the world says, go and have a bit of fun. Disciples have to be different. And all around us, we see people aiming for more money, more power, more success, more possessions, more status.

Disciples must be different. The Christian church must never lose its saltiness. So step one for witnessing is that we have to be distinctive.

Now it's very easy to think, well, the best way to do that is to cut ourselves off from the world. So if you have to go to work tomorrow and you're working with people who are aggressive, who are cold, who are harsh, who are selfish, if you have to go and meet some other people who are just pushing for more money or more status in life, it's so easy to think, well, the best way I can be different is if I just keep away from people like that.

If I hide and cut myself off, and instead I'll devote myself to church stuff, I'll spend more time just at church things and I'll avoid the rest of the world.

Well, is that what we should do? Well, I don't think so. Jesus says, you are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, 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.

[14 : 14] In 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. As disciples, we are a light.

And again, we could say many things about the properties of light, but again, we have to ask what's the main point Jesus is making? What's the key word? Is it the word light? I don't think it is.

I think the key word is the word shine because that's what Jesus is saying, your light has got to shine. Jesus does not say that we are to keep ourselves to ourselves to maintain our saltiness.

He does not say that we are to avoid the world. In fact, he says the complete opposite as disciples, we're a light that should never be kept under a basket, we're to shine openly and brightly, giving light to all around us.

So I think the main point here is in terms of the idea of visibility. So our distinctiveness as Christians has got to be seen.

[15 : 17] It has to be visible. And the only way it will be seen is if we have contact with the world around us. That means we must never cut ourselves off. We must never be isolated or separated from the world.

We must always be visible. And that raises a crucial question. We look at these verses where it says you've got to be salt and you've got to be light. Where in your life do you fulfill what this verse is saying?

Is it here on a Sunday? No. It's tomorrow morning at work or at uni or at home or on the school run or whatever you're doing.

Now, coming together on a Sunday to worship is absolutely essential as part of discipleship and other parts of the Sermon and the Mount will emphasize that being together here is part of the blessedness of being a disciple.

But being a disciple is not just about being blessed. It's about being a blessing to the world around us. That's why these verses are not lived out primarily at St. Columbus at the top of the Royal Mile at 11 o'clock on a Sunday morning.

[16 : 25] They are lived out when you go and play fiver side football, when you meet people for a coffee, when you go to a meeting, when you help out in a youth club, when you go to a parent council meeting, whatever it is, your job, your hobbies, your home, your weekly routine, these are all such brilliant witnesses, witnessing opportunities.

And that's because it's by doing these things that people will see you. They will see your distinctiveness as a Christian and you will be a light.

And this is where it's so important to remember some of the biggest theological truths that we hold to. So we would want to say that as a church we have a very big view of God.

We will want to say that God is in control of every aspect of this universe. You can't go and find any square inch of this universe that is not under God's control. You can't find any tiny aspect of our lives that's not under His sovereignty.

God is massive and He is in control. And that means that wherever you are tomorrow morning is exactly where He's put you, because that's exactly where He needs you.

[17 : 44] And we must never, ever forget that, the importance of where God places us on a Monday morning or a Wednesday afternoon. I think that's particularly true regarding our labors and our work.

Paul writes in Colossians, whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord's Christ.

And that is such an important message of encouragement for all of us, because it's very easy to think that you're not really much used to God unless you're doing some sort of work of ministry, unless you're a pastor like me or a minister in training like Calum or a church worker, a youth worker, a missionary.

It's very easy to think that, well, yeah, these are the people who are really living their lives as salt and light. It's not true. The Sermon of the Mount is reminding us that whatever your routine is, it's an amazing opportunity from God to be distinctive, to be salty, and to be clearly visible to others.

It's an amazing opportunity for you to be a light. So step one for witnessing, for sharing our faith, we need to be salty, distinctive, and clearly different from the world.

[19 : 04] Step two for witnessing, we need to be shining lights, always visible, and in regular contact with the world around us.

And both of these things that we're saying are still quite general. How exactly do we do that? How do we show the world that we are disciples?

How do we witness to others? Well, there's lots of possible answers to that, and these are all very legitimate answers. So some people would say, you must share your faith with someone, and that's a brilliant thing to do.

Some people would say, you need to challenge somebody about where they stand, and that's true as well. You need to invite someone to an event like Sam's Praise, and please do invite your friends to that.

People might say, you need to ask good questions and try and stimulate gospel conversations. These are all immensely important. They're all incredibly valuable.

[20 : 02] They're all necessary things in terms of how we witness. And Jesus doesn't mention any of them.

So what does Jesus identify as the key to being salt and light? Can you see the answer? It's your light of the world. A city set in a hill cannot be hidden, 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.

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.

That's telling us that the most basic and fundamental activity of witnessing is good works. Now, that doesn't mean the other things aren't important.

They are incredibly important, but fundamentally, at the heart of witnessing is good works. And that makes perfect sense in terms of the images that Jesus has used because both salt and light have a good effect.

[21 : 14] Salt preserves against corruption, and it enhances flavor. Light removes darkness, and it provides illumination. Our good works are works that do good.

Works that have a good effect on the world. So speaking well to others, showing kindness, working hard, being honest, helping people who are in need, showing hospitality, sharing our belongings, encouraging people, listening to people, loving our neighbor, these are all the practical core outworkings of being salt and light.

And it's absolutely essential. If I wasn't feeling unwell, I would be going to town on this point. It's absolutely essential that we make that a priority in our lives, and we must never, ever, ever replace it with something else.

So for example, I absolutely love theology. I would spend all day every day studying theology, reading books, looking at it.

It's absolutely incredible discovering more about what God has done. And I love doing that. Theology is immensely important, but it is no substitute for good works.

[22 : 36] It is no substitute for loving your neighbor and for doing good to those who are around us. Jesus didn't say, in the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see how much stuff you know and give glory to your Father who's in heaven.

He didn't say anything like that. He's placing such a strong emphasis on our good works. Our witnesses, witness as Christians, is based on a life of actions that are good.

Now the whole idea of good works is something that can easily make us think, well, Thomas, you're sounding a bit kind of wishy-washy today, but it actually makes perfect theological sense because our good works as citizens of God's kingdom are part of the whole restoration of creation that the whole message of the Bible is talking about.

Bible begins with God creating the world perfectly. It's then broken and cursed because of our sin, and God initiates this great plan of rescue. It culminates in Jesus Christ who wins victory over death and who is going to restore all creation so that in the future it's going to be restored to everything it was meant to be.

But right now, there's a glimpse of that restored creation here and now. And the glimpse is in the church of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 05] So all the goodness, the brilliance, the wonder of the new creation, we should be able to see glimpses of that in the way in which you and I live our lives and the way in which we treat one another.

And I don't need to tell you that the world around us is rotting in sin. Therefore it desperately needs salt. And I don't need to tell you that the world is full of darkness.

But it desperately needs light, and Jesus is saying the salt and the light is you as His disciples.

And so just as we are immensely blessed to know Jesus, and if you come to know Jesus, if you don't know already, you will be immensely blessed. But you are equally then meant to be an amazing blessing to others.

And by those works, by those good works, as Jesus says, people will give glory to our Father who is in heaven. And that's something that we always want to remember, that when we're thinking about witnessing, that's our goal.

[25 : 17] Our goal is not that we would be a huge church. Our goal is not that we would have an ever greater status because we're being a successful congregation. Our goal is that God would be glorified, and that He would get all the honour.

The last thing I want to say is that all of this means that there's a very important distinction, I think, that we have to recognise in terms of our witnessing.

When I say that good works are so immensely important, I'm not making it an either or. I'm not saying, you know, oh well, some people will share their faith with their friends, other people will do good works. I'm not making that kind of false dichotomies, very much a both and.

Inviting people, challenging people, sharing our faith with people is immensely important when the opportunity arises. But these kind of opportunities where you get to have a conversation about Jesus with someone, these things happen, well, for most of us, not that often.

It's something that's occasional. So we have what I would call an occasional witness where maybe somebody will ask you, what does it actually mean to be a Christian?

[26 : 31] I want to know more. What does it mean to know Jesus? You may have that kind of opportunity from time to time, but I think for most of us we would agree that these things are occasional.

These opportunities to witness happen when the occasion arises. But our good works, our visible saltiness, that's not an occasional witness.

That's a constant witness. And so every day is an opportunity to maintain that witness. Every time you go to work is an opportunity to show the kind of characteristics that Jesus outlines in the Sermon on the Mount.

Every day at university is an opportunity to have the right attitude that honors Jesus. And the amazing thing about that constant witness is that nobody can stop you doing it.

So you can ask someone to church and they'll say, oh no, I don't want to go. You could challenge somebody to have a conversation and they might shut you down straight away, but no one can stop you from being kind to them.

[27 : 40] No one can stop you from taking an interest in their lives, from being a good colleague, a good friend, a good support to them. And the key point of that constant witness is that people are watching you even when you don't realize.

And so on every occasion, people are seeing how we live and our good works stand out for us. And of course, the opposite is true as well, that failure in our good works, it makes for a constant bad witness.

And what I want to really emphasize is that if our constant witness is bad, our occasional witness will mean nothing.

So if I'm a difficult colleague all the time, and then all of a sudden I'm like, oh, but come to Sam's praise because this is a great event, I don't think my invite is going to have much effect.

Our constant witness is so important. And so all in all, these three fundamental steps of being a witness are set before us in these verses.

[28 : 56] We need to be distinctive, we need to be salty, we need to be visible, we need to shine as lights and the way that we demonstrate that is by our good works.

And I think this is one of the many, many, many, many occasions where everything that Jesus says is just proved so right by our experience.

Because I've heard so many people say that when they became a Christian or were thinking about being a Christian, they would look at Christians they knew, and they just saw that there was something different, and that was a huge attraction to them, and a huge tool in God's hands to bring these people to faith.

That is the kind of witnessing that the Sermon on the Mount is talking about, and may God make us all disciples like that. Amen, let's pray.

Father, we thank you so much for the amazingly clear and relevant teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

[30 : 13] We know that our world so desperately needs salt and light. We pray that as we go out into our lives this week that we would be so, that in every way you would help us to live lives of good works that will give glory to you.

Not in order to make us Christians, but because we're Christians, we pray that we would have a constant witness that's powerful and genuine and honouring to you.

We pray that that would be the foundation which would then mean that when the occasional chances to speak of it, the gospel come that everything fits together. Please help us Lord to have our priorities right in this way, and help us in all things just to be drawn towards what you want, not what the world around us may tell us is more important.

Please lead and guide us in all that we do. We pray that everyone here would be a witness for you in the week ahead. In Jesus' name, Amen.