

Being Salt and Light

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[0 : 01] We're going to read the Bible together from the New Testament, Matthew chapter 5, verses 13 to 16. Matthew chapter 5, verses 13 to 16, and this is towards the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, and this is God's holy word.

Jesus says, This is God's holy word.

Let's pray. Lord, we ask that as we look at this text for a few minutes and think about it together, that you would speak. So we pray, Lord, for illumination.

We ask that the Holy Spirit would come and accompany this word, this sermon, and that you would change us, you would affect us, you would not leave us as we are. So we pray that the Holy Spirit would make powerful these moments as we think about this very important passage.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So last, a couple weeks ago actually, we started a series on the Sermon on the Mount for this semester. And the past two weeks we've been looking at the Beatitudes.

[1 : 43] And just a very quick general overview of the Beatitudes. And one of the ways that we framed the Beatitudes, these eight ways Jesus talks about to live a blessed life.

One of the ways we framed it was to say that Jesus there gives you a description of the beautiful life, a life of beauty. So a beautiful life is a life where truth, the truth himself, tells you what it means to seek the good.

And if you do that, if you have truth and goodness, you have a changed heart because of Jesus, good intention, glory of God, and you do it in the truth, in the light of the word, the truth himself speaking, you've got a beautiful life.

And the Beatitudes give you that picture of what it means to live a life of beauty. And so today we turn to what is, that's, the Beatitudes is the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. And now Jesus week by week will give you topical sermons on all sorts of different things, on how to live, what it means to live a changed life, a life that looks like you're a citizen in the kingdom of God. And as you read, as we read, this week is about being salt and light. These two metaphors, salt and light. So let's think about it. We're going to have the Lord's Supper in a few minutes, so we'll think about it briefly.

[3 : 05] And it is, Jesus teaches us here, first that the world needs salt and light. And then that there is the salt and light, the salt and light we really need.

And then lastly, how to live a life as salt and light, the call to be salt and light. So what is this, what are these metaphors? That's really the question. What are they about? Let's look at it for a minute together.

The world needs salt and light. Now Jesus gives here, in the Sermon on the Mount, some people have called it a cosmic sermon. He's talking about the kingdom. He's talking about the worldwide kingdom.

And in the first century, the very first metaphor he chooses to describe life in the kingdom, life as a kingdom citizen, is salt. And in the first century, salt is a preserving agent.

So you use salt to keep your meat from going bad. You use salt as your refrigeration system in the first century. And that means that Jesus is telling us something underneath that idea.

[4 : 08] If everybody in the first century looked at salt and thought, that's how I keep my food from going bad. What is Jesus saying? He's saying the world needs salt. It needs preservation.

And that means he's suggesting to us that we live in a world of decay and corruption. And that we live in a world where everything is breaking down.

Everything. And people used to say, in the 19th century, it was popular for people to say, we are in an industrial age. In an age after the enlightenment.

And in this age, we're going to make progress. And we're going to reach utopia. And everything is going to be amazing. And technology advances. And we'll see the realization of this wonderful society.

And then the 20th century came. And it was the bloodiest century on record. The worst wars. And then we realized generation after generation, no matter how much good technology we got.

[5 : 03] No matter how many more screens we make. That we're not making progress. Everything's decaying. Everything's falling apart. And I read in high school.

And when I say, I read in high school, that's very loose use of the term read. In high school, I was assigned a book to read that you probably have heard of. Chinua Chibis, the African writer, Things Fall Apart.

And I remember so much of that book. No. I don't remember anything. Because I was a high schooler. And I didn't read my books. If you're a high schooler here, you should read your books. But I do remember the title.

And the title is very famous, Things Fall Apart. And that title sticks with anybody. And I'm sure the book lays that out very clearly. But things do fall apart.

That's a way to say it. That's what Jesus is saying. Things fall apart. Everything falls apart.

Physically, we are falling apart. And eventually, every single part of who we are will decay.

[6 : 05] Physically. And relationally, it's very, very hard to keep relationships intact. Relationships tend to fall apart. And if you're not constantly pulling the weeds up from your relationships, they're probably going to fall apart.

And scientifically, we know that it's also true. The second law of thermodynamics, which says science people, who know better than me about this, that everything is moving into a state of disorder, away from order.

All things move towards disorder, not order. And the second law of thermodynamics tells us, apparently, that in 10 to the 26th power of years from now, the sun will explode. And we will experience either heat death or cold death.

Right? It's that everything's falling apart. And we could talk about it in every single category of existence. So politically, as soon as somebody takes power in office, a new government comes in, that day one is the first day towards the day of their demise.

Right? Everything's falling apart. Every time an empire comes into power, the first day of the empire is the first day towards the time when it will cease. It won't last. Nothing lasts. Everything decays.

[7 : 16] And so Jesus is saying here that the world needs preservation. Salt. Salt. Because everything is falling apart. And there's something very wrong with this life.

And I think we all know that. No matter what background we come from, no matter what traditions we come from. And so he's saying here, he's assuming here, there is a fix.

There is preservation. There is a hope. So secondly, what is it? The salt, the light. Now, it's very clear in this passage that Jesus is talking to disciples. He's talking to followers of Jesus.

And he's saying to them, you have got to go and be salt and light. But again, just like when he says the world needs help and hope because it's under decay, that's the presupposition.

That's underneath his claim. There's also something else here that's underneath. And that's that he's assuming the salt, the light, the true agent of preservation.

[8 : 14] Who's talking here? It's Jesus. And while he's calling on us to be salt and light, and we'll get to that in just a moment. You know, he's saying to us, if you're a Christian, you're a lamp.

That's the exact word he uses. You're a lamp. You're not the sun. You know, what do lamps do? They don't. What does the moon do? You're the moon. You're not the sun. You reflect. But you're not the source of light.

You're not the origin of that light. No, not at all. There's got to be something more. Who can fix the decay? Who can stop the problem that we face? The great decay.

The great decay of our bodies. The great decay of all empire and government. The great decay of everything around us. Who can stop it? And we saw last week that it's Jesus that's giving the Sermon on the Mount.

And if you were here, if you weren't here last week, I can just very briefly say that one of the ways Matthew presents the Sermon on the Mount is that he presents Jesus as this true and better Moses.

[9 : 14] Who comes up at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount and stands on the mountain. And it says that he sits down in authority and he opens his mouth and he speaks and he gives this new law.

The law of the kingdom. Just like Moses went up the mountain. But when Moses went up the mountain, boy, he didn't sit down. He didn't have authority. He heard the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. And then delivered them.

But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes up the mountain and he sits down as if on a throne on the side of a mountain. And he speaks the Sermon on the Mount because he doesn't need anybody to tell him the new law. He has the authority because it's saying, Matthew, it's very subtly saying without saying it, Jesus is God.

He doesn't need to receive the law. He just gives it. And here we've got God himself saying the world needs salt and light. And you flip over to John's Gospel and you remember Jesus will say, I am the light of the world.

I am the light. He is the salt. He's the preserving agent. That's how Paul puts it in Colossians chapter 1. He says that in him, in Jesus Christ, all things are held together.

[10 : 21] He preserves it. And if Jesus stopped right now, the Logos himself, the eternal word, holding all of creation together, every molecule in your body together, mediating that reality, then you would just fly apart like dust.

He holds it together. But then he also says, but I'm also the light who can fix it as well. And I can be, what does light do? Light exposes. He exposes, but then light brings warmth. Light heals.

And he's saying that that's him. That's the assumption here in this passage. What does he say?

When he says, I'm the light, what is he saying? He's saying, what else does he say in John's Gospel? I am the way.

I am the truth. I am the life. That's the same thing as saying I'm salt and I'm light. It's the very same concept. And that means that Jesus Christ here, the true and better Moses, is assuming something. Before you can ever get to the command that we're going to focus on now, you, if you're a believer, go and be salt and light. You've got to first be willing to say and see, I can only reflect.

[11 : 24] I can only be a tiny little dash pinch of salt. I'm not the salt. I can only be a little lamp. I'm not the sun. But he is. He is. And we're being told here that in the incarnation, in the coming of the Son of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, the one who holds all the world together as preserving agent, the only one who can heal the world and bring a cosmic kingdom, a holistic kingdom, he voluntarily subjected himself to decay.

He subjected his body, his physical body to decay. He died. He gave himself over to the second law of thermodynamics. He gave himself away so that he could be light and life to us, so that he could heal the land, so that he could be the cosmic redeemer.

Now, if you believe that tonight, Jesus is talking to you. And now he's saying, and this is the main thing, he's saying, now, go into the city and be salt and light.

So point three. We only have three points. We're all ready to point three. Point three. How do we do that? Here's the question that's left for us. Will you, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, will you go tomorrow into the city and be salt and light like he calls you to be, like he's invited you to be?

Now, what does that mean? Remember that this is in the context of the Beatitudes. And at the very end of the Beatitudes, in verse 11 and 12, one of the last things Jesus says is, blessed are you when you're reviled and persecuted for my name's sake.

[13 : 09] So Jesus is assuming here that if you follow Jesus, you've gone out into the world and you've got a public faith, a living faith, that you've got a faith that's willing to count the cost.

And before Christ to the point of suffering in some way. And so one of the implicit questions here that Jesus is asking is, what does a kingdom life look like in this world for followers of Jesus, especially in a city, in a time where most people aren't walking around as Christians?

What does it look like? He's asking, have you had to count the cost in any way? Has following Jesus with public faith, shining the spotlight on him with your life, has that cost you in any way at all, at any point in your life?

That's the question. That's the context where then he turns and says, okay. In other words, it is, it is going to cost you. If you're living a public faith, it's going to cost in some way. And so then he says, now go be salt and light.

Now he's talking there about how to go and live out in the world that doesn't all believe and follow Jesus Christ. And that means he's assuming that you're going to have one of a few types of responses to public faith that costs something, that causes people, maybe at times, to revile you, to dislike you, to even persecute.

[14 : 22] And one of those is that, look, if being a Christian in the public world, in the modern secular public world that we live in, if it is challenging, one of the things we'll be tempted to do is compromise and to just live a life that looks identical to everybody else, the normal default cultural patterns of our city.

That's one way we might go. The other way we might go is we might become isolationists. And isolationists are so scared of public faith that they back into the Christian community and will never take a front seat.

You know, always a back seat. Anytime you're in your, when you're in your workplace, you take the back seat. When you're, you won't make non-Christian friends. You won't go out into the city and get stuck in to other communities other than just the local church.

And he's saying that's the isolationist mentality. And how, look, in other words, he's asking, how in the world can you live the life of Beatitudes if you're not out in the city living in salt and light? How could you ever be a peacemaker if you're not willing to go out and get stuck into, right in the middle of people's conflict to try to help heal it?

How could you ever show mercy? Blessed are those who show mercy if you're never out amongst those who need mercy. How could people revile you for following Jesus if you're never out amongst people who don't follow Jesus?

[15 : 39] That's the question he's asking here. And so he turns and says, no, you've got to be salt and light. There were two groups, there were two groups in Jesus's lifetime in the first century when he says this, that because of the Greco-Roman culture they lived in and because the Roman Empire had occupied Israel, the land of Israel, they reacted by becoming isolationist.

And one of those groups were called the Zealots. And the Zealots were activists. You know, they hated everything, everything about the Roman Empire.

And they said, you know, the only way to really follow God in this world is to take over the country and to cause a revolution, to be an activist. You know, that impulse that sometimes Christians still have, which says, you know, we're never really going to win unless we're in power.

We've got to seek power. The other group in Jesus's time in the first century were the Essenes. And the Essenes reacted as isolationists, but in exactly the opposite way. They moved to caves near the Dead Sea.

And they said, look, we're just going to wait this out. We're going to form our own communities, our own towns, our own cities in the caves near the Dead Sea. And we'll wait till the Roman Empire is gone. And then we'll reclaim the land and we'll follow God publicly again.

[16 : 56] Now, in God's providence, the Essenes did provide for us lots of manuscripts that we find very valuable today. And so there's a good outcome to some degree. But Jesus is countering both of those.

Compromise on the one hand and different types of isolationism on the other hand. And he's saying, no, the method of the Christian life is to be salt and light in the world in whatever place God has put you.

And so let me finish by just saying what that means in very practical detail for just a moment. First, he says, you've got to go into the world and be light. And what does light do?

Light exposes darkness. And that means that when you're around wherever God has put you, in university, in the workplace, in school, in your neighborhoods, around your neighbors in the flats, wherever you might be, do you live a life of beauty, the life of the Beatitudes, to such a degree that it actually exposes the darkness around you?

What does that look like? It looks like that when you're at work and you walk into a certain room and there's gossip, there's gossip everywhere about your coworkers and about your boss and about how everybody hates the boss.

[18 : 14] Does the train of gossip end with you, stop with you, because you're living a life of beauty? It looks like this, that if you're in a workplace, in a business, and it's full of corrupt practices, has there come a point where you said, I won't do that?

I won't participate in that corruption because you live the blessed life, the life of beauty. Light exposes the darkness, but at the same time, salt preserves and flavors the world. And so on the one hand, while a life of beauty is a life that exposes darkness, at the same time, you also step into that room and you're not a killjoy because salt gives flavor. Salt preserves. Salt lifts up. What is he saying? He's saying when you combine both of these, salt and light at the same time, you're not the guy, you're not the person where when you're coming down the hallway, everybody says, shh, they're coming, that person who's going to, you know, make the room very dour and sad because they're coming and they're going to expose the darkness and we'll all be miserable. No, that's not what he means. He means that you live such a life of beauty and joy, the life of beatitude, that people want to be around you, that you don't bring things down, you lift things up. [19 : 32] So when you expose the darkness, it's because you replace it with something better. Your joy kills the gossip. Your gladness kills whatever's going on in the corruption in the business that you're working in.

One of the ways to put it is, another way to put it that summarizes it, I think, is that salt and light, salt in particular, in the ancient Near East, salt was an agent also of cleansing. So salt was not only a preservation agent but also a purification agent. And you see this actually in the Old Testament. So there's a moment in 2 Kings chapter 2 where the men of the city say to Elisha, the prophet, the situation in our city is pleasant as my Lord sees but the water is corrupted. The water is bad. The land is unfruitful. And so Elisha said, bring me a bowl with salt in it. And they brought it to him and they went to the spring of water and they threw salt into the water. And the Lord said, I have now healed this water. From now on, neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it. So in this moment, now a first century reader of Matthew written to Jewish people would have remembered that.

[20 : 38] They would have known salt has been used in the past as an agent of purification. And what are we being told here? We're being told that a person who has put on the integrity of the identity of Christ is a person of salt and light that preserves, purifies, beautifies, exposes spaces that you walk into.

that you mirror the life of Jesus. You mirror the blessed life into the world. Last thing. What does salt, what does light do?

All right, what does he say? Look, verse 13, he says something very strange. He says, you are the salt of the earth, but then here's the clause. But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?

And I once heard a debate between an atheist philosopher and a Christian theologian about this verse, verse 13, and they asked, the atheist said, look, salt can never lose its taste.

Salt does not diminish like that from flavor. And so Jesus clearly is speaking in error here, but boy, misunderstanding of what Jesus is saying. What is Jesus saying?

[21 : 45] If salt has lost its flavor, how can it be restored? What's the point of it? It's an even stronger term in Greek than that. He's saying, if salt is thrown out on the floor, thrown on the ground, and you just walk on top of it, he says that's useless.

That's the language there. What is he saying? He's saying, if God has set you apart to be a preserving agent and a cleansing agent, then what are you doing?

If you've corrupted, if you've just become like the normal patterns of the world, if your life looks no different than everybody else's, what use is your saltiness? You've been made salt, but if you've compromised, then you've just thrown the salt out onto the ground.

You're not using it. You're not being it, right? Or if you're salty, if Jesus has made you salty, but you're isolationist, if you go and live in the caves and think I'm going to be a desert monk, what good is that?

You've lost your saltiness. We might as well just dump the salt on the ground and trample on it. It's the same thing that I do, Heather and I, my wife and I, with every one of our kids when they hit toddler years, we have five children, and every time they hit toddler years, two to three years old, what do we do?

[22 : 54] We're at the table and they say, salt, salt, salt, salt, salt, and we take salt shaker and we keep the lid completely sealed and we just, there you go, buddy.

Have all the salt you want, right? And immediately the vegetable stays completely different to them, you know? Now, in our case, that's a wise use of salt.

We don't use it at all. But, boy, it's not the right use of salt. It's silly. It's pointless, you know? Sometimes the salt doesn't have a lid on it, and so we've just dumped it on the floor. And that's exactly what Jesus is saying.

If you've been changed, if you've been made salt to preserve and cleanse, what does he say about light? He says, what good is light if you light a lamp and stick it under a basket?

He's saying that it is not the nature of salt to not taste salty. It is not the nature of light to be hidden. You can't stop light. If you light something, boy, the light travels so fast.

[23 : 52] It gets everywhere. And this would have been so powerful to a first century person because unlike us in the first century, they don't have electricity. And you don't light lights very often because you have to burn oil to have light at night.

And that's very, very expensive. And so that first century here would have, when he said, what good is, do you ever turn on a light at night, burn oil in your homes at night in the first century, and then put that under a basket?

And they would have said, the hero would have said, absolutely not. That's like running your boiler while you're on holiday the entire time. That would be the equivalent for us, right? He said, that's so expensive.

It's foolish, right? It's against your nature. It's against your nature to compromise and to be just like everybody else in the city. It's against your nature to be hidden and isolationist.

And it is your nature to live the blessed life, the life of beauty, the life of beauty that brings, expose, that exposes the darkness, but brings joy in the name of Jesus.

[24 : 55] And so he puts it this way to finish. He says, live your life in such a way that you let your light shine, the light of Jesus through you shine, so that people will see your good works and glorify God and be pointed to Christ, be pointed to something bigger than you and better than you in the end.

This is a call to live tonight with a very definite purpose. So let me give you an example from the second century, and this will be the final word.

This is from a letter called the Epistle to Diognetus that was written as early as 130 A.D. So this is very early in Christian history.

And this letter is written by a man named Mephetes in Greek, and he's writing it to a man named Diognetus. And he's trying to compel Diognetus to believe in Jesus.

And one of the ways he does that is he says, Diognetus, you know how the Christians live. And this is what he writes. He says, Diognetus, the Christians are distinguished from other people, not by the country they live in, not by the language they speak, not by the customs that they observe.

[26 : 10] They don't inhabit cities of their own. They do not employ a peculiar form of speech. They don't lead a life which is marked out by any peculiarity. But inhabiting the Greek as well as the barbarian cities, they follow the customs of the natives.

They wear the same clothing. They eat the same food. They live in ordinary conduct in the same ways as everybody else. And yet at the same time, they're never isolationists.

Never. But at the same time, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. And this is what he says. They dwell in our country, but they live as sojourners.

As if this is not their final home. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet they endure all things. They marry as does others.

They beget children as everyone else does, but they do not destroy their offspring. They are in the flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh.

[27 : 23] They obey the laws, but at the same time, they surpass the laws by their lives. They are the best of citizens. They love all people, Jew, Greek, Roman.

They're persecuted by all. They are unknown, yet they're condemned. They are put to death, yet they're restored to life. They're reviled, yet they bless. They are insulted, yet they repay the insult with honor.

They do good, yet they are punished as evildoers. When punished, they rejoice. And yet those who hate them are unable to explain or give a reason for why they hate them. To sum it all up in one word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are in the world.

The soul is dispersed through all the parts of the body, and so God has scattered the Christians throughout all the cities of our world. Now, let me ask you, will you this week commune? Will you commune with the light himself in order that you can go wherever God has put you in a little world that God has put you in this city and be salt and light for the city?

[28 : 36] And if you're not, will you come tonight to the Lord's Supper and commune with Jesus Christ by the Spirit for a little bit so that you can have the strength to go out into our great city and be salt and light, to let your good work shine forth so that other people will see it and give glory to the Father who is in heaven.

Let's pray. Father, we ask for that. We ask that you would teach each of us specifically tonight what it might look like to be salt and light in our workplace, in our university context, in our school, wherever you've put us.

And so use this great meal, the Lord's Supper, this communion meal in just a few minutes to transform us, God, to remind us of who we are and then send us forth in power, the power of the light himself.

And so we ask for that in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.