

Sunday, November 22, 2020 | Stand-Alone Teaching

Matthew 5:13-16 | In Like Salt, Bright Like a Light

Last week, we closed our Beatitude series by talking about Christian persecution. The world hates us because we are different, and so they persecute us. But we're different because of the change that Jesus has wrought in us through the Gospel. This change makes us poor, mourn, meek, hungry, and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and, of course, persecuted (cf. Matt 5:1-11). Simply put, we stick out like a sore thumb because we are different.

Today, Jesus gives us two metaphors, which helps explain just how different we really are.

READ: Matthew 5:13-16 (ESV)

¹³ “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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.

In this passage, Jesus' point about our difference from the world is two-fold.

i. Salt is useful, like the disciple is useful.

To illustrate our deployment in the world, Jesus uses the metaphor of salt. And not unlike today, salt had many uses in the ancient world.

For instance, salt was used in Israel's sacrifices (Lev. 2:13).¹ In small quantities, it was used as fertilizer.² Though not enough to thoroughly “salt the earth,” which was another everyday use for salt in the Ancient world where a victorious army would roam throughout an enemy's countryside and sow so much sodium chloride that the ground

¹ Tuner, David L., *Matthew*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2008), p. 154.

² France, R. T., *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2007), p. 174, seems to think this particular use of salt isn't a possibility as it hasn't been officially verified.

would become barren.³ Salt was used to treat wineskins.⁴ Amazingly, a saline solution was even used to sanitize and clean newborns.⁵ Salt is a preservative and, of course, used for seasoning food.⁶ Of those just listed, the last two are by far and away salt's primary use in the first-century.⁷

Now, the principle that Jesus is teaching isn't so specific that we can point to any of these uses for salt and start drawing conclusions.⁸ Instead, Jesus is making a more generalized point about how versatile salt is because of its saltiness. Salt is deployed in the world in many different ways because of its' nature. No one uses salt because it looks good. People use salt because of the properties which make up its composition. What's more, sodium chloride doesn't lose its distinctiveness overtime. No matter how long you have a grain of salt, it'll stay salt.

Likewise, a follower of Jesus is, by their nature, a follower of Jesus. It is the solitary thing that makes a follower of Jesus, a follower of Jesus. They are Christ-like in their conduct and their speech. So, when Jesus is talking about salt, he's not referring to a mineral's chemistry but a disciple's character. Jesus is talking less about what one does and more about what one is.⁹ You see, technically speaking, "unsalty" is an oxymoron when talking specifically about salt. There's no such thing as unsalty salt. It'd be like saying water isn't wet.¹⁰ Once salt loses the thing that makes it salty, it ceases to be salt and becomes nothing more than white sand.

However, people are far more complicated than simple table salt. While salt never ceases to be salt, the disciple can lose sight of why they were deployed here in the first place. If this happens, this person loses their ability to contribute to society in the way that God intended. They were once "salty," but now they have lost their "saltiness." This is impossible for actual salt. But, as we all know, this is more than possible for a Christian. In fact, it's so common that it's become a tired cliché that can refer to a Christian who is such in name only. A Christian can lose their uniqueness in a way that salt cannot.

³ Wikipedia contributors, "Salting the earth," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Salting_the_earth&oldid=975847331, [accessed November 20, 2020].

⁴ Craig, Keener S., *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1999), p. 172.

⁵ Forcada, M, "Salting Babies. Innovation and Tradition in Premodern Procedures for Neonatal Care," Suhayl, *International Journal for the History of the Exact and Natural Sciences in Islamic Civilization*, Vol. 11, 1, p. 155-78, <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/Suhayl/article/view/267257>, [accessed, November 20, 2020].

⁶ Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1992), p. 104.

⁷ France (2007), p. 174.

⁸ Tuner (2008), p. 155.

⁹ Keener (1999), p. 172.

¹⁰ France (2007), p. 174.

In fact, this is why Jesus uses the Greek term **μωραίνω** (mo-rai'-no). The ESV has translated this word as, "lost its taste," and in other versions, this passage reads, "loses its flavor," or "lost his savor," or "becomes tasteless."¹¹ However, the literal meaning of *moraino* is "to make or become foolish."¹² Jesus' audience likely would've smirked a bit as this term is a brilliant play on words.¹³ It would've been like saying, "The salt has become a comedian!" As Carson notes, "It is hard not to conclude that disciples who lose their savor are in fact making fools of themselves."¹⁴ Nothing is sillier than a Christian behaving like a non-Christian. It is as ludicrous as saltless salt and waterless water. It just doesn't make sense. It's more of a joke than anything else.

Yet, this ridiculous notion doesn't stop Jesus from drawing some conclusions. He tells his audience to suppose that salt could lose its saltiness. What would we do with it? He says, "**It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.**" And, in this conclusion, the warning is clear for Christ's followers. What happens to a Christian who loses their purpose and becomes "saltless?" What happens to a Christian when they lose their usefulness and become "tasteless?" They are discarded. They are thrown away.

What's more, this is not the only place where Jesus warned about the outcome of these so-called "tasteless" followers. Throughout the Gospels and in a variety of different ways, Jesus was very clear about what will happen to Christians who perpetuate un-Christlike behavior (Jn. 4:36; Rom. 1:13; 6:21; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 1:11; 4:17; Heb. 12:11; Jas. 3:17). Interestingly, His favorite metaphor was fruit. And quite possibly, his most famous application of this illustration comes in John 15.

READ: John 15:1-8 (ESV)

¹ I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that **does not bear fruit** he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ **If anyone does not abide**

¹¹ France (2007), p. 175.

¹² Morris (1992), p. 104.

¹³ Keener (1999), p. 173.

¹⁴ Carson D.A., *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew and Mark, Volume 9, Revised Edition, General Editors Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2010), p. 169.

in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

This pruning of the saltless-tasteless-fruitless-follower is brought into vivid reality later in Matthew.

READ: Matthew 21:18-22 (ESV)

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" ²¹ And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

If we're not careful, we can look from a distance like a tree in full bloom with fruit ripe for the picking. But do not get too close, for, upon closer inspection, it will be revealed that we are defective and lacking that which is supposed to give us purpose. We are "in leaf," but we are lacking root enough to sustain fruit.¹⁵ At best, we are simply decorative. At worst, we are shamefully deceptive, only impressing but never impacting those around us in a meaningful way. Paul would later admonish his young protégé, Timothy, to absolutely avoid, at all cost, those who have the *appearance* of godliness, but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

The faithful life leads to a fruitful and flavorful life. Like a vine that bears grapes, a tree that bears figs, and salt that is salty, those who follow Jesus are deployed in this world for a purpose. They will not be cursed to wither away. They will not be cut off and be tossed into the fire. They will not be thrown out to be "trampled under people's feet." The faithful follower is at work in the world for the cause of Christ and that work gives them value and security.

But not only is the disciple useful like salt, but they are also unique like a bright light.

ii. Light is unique, like the disciple is unique.

¹⁵ Lanier, Greg, "Why Did Jesus Curse the Fig Tree?" October 2, 2018, *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jesus-curse-fig-tree/>, [accessed, November 15, 2020].

To illustrate our distinctiveness from the world, Jesus uses the metaphor of light. He expresses this metaphor in two ways.

a. The Lights of a City

Just as a big city's collective luminescence can be seen from afar, so is the communal incandescence of the Church seen by the entire world.¹⁶

EXAMPLE: Here's a picture that the ISS snapped, which shows what the eastern seaboard looks like at night. <INSERT ISS PICTURE> Here are some quick facts about the ISS.¹⁷

- Travels at a speed of 5 miles per second, which is around 15,500 miles per hour. This means it can traverse the entire continental United States, from Washington State to Miami Beach, FL, in less than 10 minutes.
- In a 24hr period, the ISS orbits earth 16 times, which is equivalent to a roundtrip flight to the moon!
- It orbits roughly 250 miles from the earth's surface, which is approximately the same distance from Baltimore to Virginia Beach.

Stop and think about this for one moment. The lights of a city on earth are easily seen by a vehicle traveling eight-times the velocity of a bullet¹⁸ for the simple reason that they are grouped together. Their collective luminescence and communal incandescence are blatantly obvious to astronauts who are over 250 miles above the world's surface because a thousand lights are more easily seen than one.

Here's my point. Our light—the light of the Church—is best seen when it is assembled with other lights. An isolated light can hardly be seen, but a group of assembled lights can scarcely be hidden.

It is for this reason that Jesus called the Church an **ἐκκλησία** (ekklēsia) (cf. Mat. 16:18; Ac. 2:47; 14:23; 1 Cor. 1:2). The *ekklēsia* was a simple Greek term that referred to a called out "assembly." *Ekklēsia* isn't an exceptional word. In fact, it could refer to *any* group of people who were gathered together.¹⁹ That means this word could refer to a Jewish assembly, as in a synagogue, or a Roman assembly, as in the Senate, or a simple

¹⁶ France (2007) p. 171.

¹⁷ Garcia, Mark, Ed., "International Space Station Facts and Figures," November 2, 2020, NASA, <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/facts-and-figures>, [accessed, November 15, 2020].

¹⁸ Wikipedia contributors, "Muzzle velocity," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Muzzle_velocity&oldid=989283083, [accessed November 21, 2020].

¹⁹ Morris (1992), p. 424.

community assembly, as in a faceless mob (cf. Ac. 19:32-41).²⁰ The point of this word isn't that a group assembled; the point of this word is that they gathered for a common purpose. Someone or something brought them together for a joint endeavor.

All the Church is a group of diverse people meeting together for a shared objective. The Church is here for us to encourage one another. A tree cannot grow without soil. A calf will not survive in the wild without a herd. Likewise, we will not grow as Christians unless we're in a Christian community. A Christian cannot succeed without the Christian assembly—*the Church*.

This is why the writer of Hebrews admonishes us to make Church a priority (Heb 10:19-25). He tells us not to neglect her because she is the best avenue we have to encourage one another. That in these final days, we ought to lovingly spur, spark, and stir one another into doing good works. Every believer should be around those who are aflame with holy fire so that they too may begin to burn all the brighter. A charcoal briquette will quickly cool when separated from the fire. Only when it is in the community of embers can it remain warm.

The Church is not an island. The Church is a city on a hill. As such, our light must shine for all to see.

Now, not only is our light compared to a city on a hill, but Jesus also says it's like a candle on a table.

b. The Light of a Lamp

Just as the light from a candle illuminates an entire room, so too is the light of a Christian's witness shining forth and illuminating their own little part of the world. A personal testimony can have a significant impact in the lives of those who hear and see it.

READ: 1 John 1:1-4 (ESV)

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete

The first-hand experience with a personal God can produce a bountiful harvest in others. To hide your witness, say under a "basket," is foolishness. It negates the impact the light can have in a community. Likewise, should we hide our light, should we cover it leaving our friends, family, and neighbors to wallow in the dark, we too would be just as foolish as if one were trying to cook in the dark though the light is but a switch away.

READ: Romans 10:14-17 (ESV)

¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the Gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Your witness is like a sole candle in a dark room. It doesn't matter how you share your light with others; the point is to just do it. Failing to do so is to go against your new nature and deny your commission (cf. Mat. 28:19-20). We are light; we are useful only because of our distinction from the dark world. Light doesn't have a choice on which it shines. It merely shines on all those who are close by. So too ought we to shine so that "they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Our light is a reflected light. Any good they see in us is a "good" which has come from the Father. It is a pointer to the One who spoke light itself into existence. May they see Jesus when they see us.

So, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

A Christian makes a difference by being different.

Jesus knows the two most significant challenges we have regarding our witness are maintaining our *usefulness* and maintaining our *uniqueness*.²¹ We are an alternative society within our own society. Yet, that difference can sometimes chip away at what makes us useful. Or worse, the broader community will try and make us into something less unique; something more like them and less unusual. When this happens, we become about as valuable as unsalty salt and lights which do not shine.²²

During His prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed about our engagement with the world but also about our distinction from the world. On the surface, this seems but a slight difference.

²¹ Turner (2008), p. 156.

²² Keener (1999), p. 172.

However, this is slight difference in phrasing makes a significant difference in our mentality. We must remember as we walk throughout this old world that we are in the world but we are not of the world. We forget this to our peril.

READ: John 17:16-17 (ESV)

¹⁶They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

The reason for our difference is that we are people of the Book. We are Beatitude people. These Scriptures separate us from the mainstream. The Bible teaches us to live differently than those who are around us. And we live differently because we want to glorify God. And to give glory to God is our one and only purpose (cf. Ps. 150; 1 Cor. 10:31).

Salt is useful because of its' deployment in the world, and light is significant because of its distinctiveness from the world. Meaning, we—the salt and light of this world—mustn't only be useful while we are in the world, but we must also be recognizable while we are in the world. We should be different and be seen as something other than those who are around us. Salt in a shaker is of tiny use *concealed* in a cupboard. A city on a hill is of small charm *camouflaged* by darkness. And a lamp on a table is of little effect *covered* by a cup.²³ A witness who doesn't impact and impress the world isn't a witness at all. If you have utterly assimilated into our culture, you have lost your "saltiness;" you have lost your usefulness. If you have entirely segregated yourself from the culture, you have lost your "lightness;" you have lost your uniqueness. We are not lonely hermits, nor are we first-rate mimes. We are Christians. We are in the world, but not of the world.

SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

A Christian makes a difference by being different.

They are the salt, dissimilar from whatever is being salted; they are the light, distinguished from the darkness around them. Our distinctiveness is what impresses the world and gives the Church its impact.

So be different. You're a Christian, for goodness' sake. Act like it.

²³ France (2007), p. 172.