

The Salt of the Earth and the Light of the World

Matthew 5:13-16

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Introduction

Today we come to the first major transition in the Sermon on the Mount.

- Matthew 5:13-16 is the bridge that carries us from the Beatitudes
 - to Jesus' exposition of God's Law
 - The exposition of the Law begins here and continues all the way through to the end of chapter 6.

A. With Matthew 5:13-16,

- Jesus moves from **describing** the blessed man
 - to **instructing** that man in the way He should live.

1) There is even a change in person.

- In the Beatitudes, He uses the third person.
 - That is, He says:
 - “blessed are **the** poor,” and
 - “blessed are **those who...**”
 - In other words, He is talking **about** the blessed man rather than **to** the blessed man.
- But from this transition onward—all the way into chapter 7...
 - He switches to the second person...
 - He say,
 - “I say to **you**,”
 - “**You** have heard it said,”
 - “When **you** pray.”

2) With this change in person, there is also a change from the indicative to the imperative.

- The indicative is a simple statement of fact,
 - and the imperative is a command.
- Interestingly, this transition in mood occurs in this transitional passage!
 - Jesus begins by declaring what His disciples are:

- “You are the salt of the earth,”
- “You are the light of the world.”
- Those are indicatives.
- But then He switches to the imperative when He says:
 - “Let your light so shine before men...”

TRANS> He transitions from what you are, to what you are to do.

- You are light—now live as light.

3) The Apostles often follow this model in their own teaching.

- They begin with the indicatives,
 - declaring what we are in Christ and the rich blessings we have in Him...
 - Then they exhort us to live out our high calling in Christ in response to the mercies we have received.
- In Paul’s letter to the Romans, for example,
 - He spends the first 11 chapters describing the mercies of God to us (the indicative)
 - Then at the beginning of chapter 12, He transitions, saying,
 - I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God,
 - [In the view of everything that I have said thus far about God’s mercies to you]...
 - that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service.
 - [Live out the blessing that God has bestowed on you]

B. This establishes a very important pattern for what it means to be Christ’s disciple!

- The Christian life begins with God’s grace...
 - Then everything else grows out of that.
 - You can’t receive the grace of God without it making a difference in your life.
- It begins with Him changing everything about you,
 - It continues with you living as those changed persons He has made you to be.
 - He declares that you are new creatures in Him,
 - then He leads you to live as new creatures.

- You first receive His voice of grace that calls you to salvation and imparts new life to you...
 - Then you follow Him.
 - Jesus says,
 - “My sheep hear my voice, and the follow me.”
- Even the Ten Commandments begin with the declaration that He is our Lord and our God and the One who has redeemed us...
 - Then, in light of that salvation,
 - we are called to “have no other God’s” and so forth.
- Be sure to keep the order straight!
 - You do not obey in order to receive the grace,
 - But you obey because you have received grace.

TRANS> Now as we turn our focus to the very familiar words of Jesus about being the salt of the earth and the light of the world,

- you will see how important the context is!
 - Too often, these words have been ripped out of their context...
 - They have been taken as a carte blanche that can be filled in however we want...
 - They are not that at all...
 - There is a context in the Beatitudes that come before and the exposition of the law which comes after.
 - We are not free to decide what salt and light are...
 - There is a context to tell us—

So first of all, I want you to understand that if you are blessed in Jesus Christ,

I. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

A. All you who are blessed in Jesus Christ, be encouraged because this is what you are!

- Jesus is not commanding you to become salt and light here,
 - He is stating a fact about you
 - He is declaring that you are such!

1. Of course, this is not true of everyone.

- a. Jesus does not say that everyone is salt and light.
 - Obviously, He is talking to His disciples here.
 - Those who rejected Him thought they were salt and light—
 - a light to guide the blind—
 - But they were themselves in the dark.

- b. When Jesus says that “you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world,”
 - He is talking to those who have fit the description of the blessed man given in verses 3-10.
 - You are salt and light only if you are:
 - poor in spirit,
 - mourning,
 - meek,
 - hungering and thirsting for righteousness,
 - merciful,
 - pure in heart,
 - a peacemaker,
 - and persecuted for righteousness sake.

- 2. This description of the blessed man is very surprising—very striking!
 - a. It is not the man who is accomplished,
 - but the man who is poor and needy and deficient that is blessed.
 - Our difficulty in accepting this as a reality is demonstrated by the common tendency to forget the beatitudes as soon as we come to verse 13...
 - And to define the one who is salt and light as the one who is accomplished and successful rather than poor and hungry.

 - b. But brothers and sisters,
 - you become what the Beatitudes describe as soon as you meet King Jesus in a saving way!
 - 1) He is the King of Glory, and as soon as you see Him...
 - You see yourself before Him and you are ashamed...
 - As Ezekiel says, you “loathe yourself...”
 - Like Isaiah, you say, “Woe is me for I am undone.”
 - Like Peter, you say, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

 - 2) As soon as you see Him,

- all your attainments, all your morality, all your goodness, all your accomplishments become dung!
 - You find that you have no cause for boasting.
 - You have been stripped of all your glory and left poor and needy...
 - a) Poor in spirit—
 - a beggar before God...
 - b) Mourning—
 - because you see your sin and misery apart from Christ.
 - c) Meek—
 - because you know that if you follow your own wisdom, you will only make a mess of things.
 - You will turn your life over to Him, you cannot direct Him, but He must direct you!
 - d) Hungering and thirsting for righteousness—
 - because you see the beauty of the righteousness that King Jesus offers and you crave it!
 - e) Merciful—
 - because you see yourself as a debtor to God's mercy—
 - He has picked you up from the bottom, and you are now ready to show mercy to others!
 - f) Pure in heart—
 - there is no more pretending, the king of Glory has eyes that see right through you—what you are, you are before Him.
 - g) A peacemaker—
 - because you have received peace through Jesus and want the whole world to unite together in Him!
 - h) And persecuted—
 - because other people do not like your new life and your new estimation of yourself.
- c. There He is, the Lord of Glory crucified for you!
- 1) You see so clearly now that it had to be so if you were going to redeemed!

- You see that your sin is such that it demanded the shedding of the blood of the Son of God on the cross!
 - Nothing else was sufficient to take away your sin!
 - The glory you sinned against was too glorious to accept any lesser sacrifice than this!
- 2) And even though your sin was such that it demanded this great price—
- In His great mercy, He willingly gave Himself for you!
 - The Creator of the world took your curse!
 - He has revealed all this to you and the result is that you have become what Jesus describes as a blessed man!
 - Poor in spirit, mourning, meek, and so on...
3. If this is you, you are the blessed person described in these Beatitudes!
- a. You have received the greatest blessing of all!
- Salvation in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ!
 - How blessed are you!
 - The kingdom of heaven belongs to you!
 - You will be comforted
 - You will inherit the earth
 - You will be filled with righteousness
 - You shall obtain mercy
 - You shall see God
 - You shall be called a son of God!
 - Your reward in Heaven will be great!
- b. It may seem to you that you don't have much to offer...
- Most people in the world do not value what you have...
 - In fact, they despise what you have...
 - They revile you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely because of what you have become in Christ...
 - But Jesus says that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world!
 - Not because of some great achievement on your part!
 - But because of what you are before Him!—poor in spirit, one who mourns, one who hungers for righteousness...

- c. Jesus does not say that you must perform some great work or have some phenomenal ability to be salt and light...
 - You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world if you are just simply a true disciple of His!
- B. You are salt and light because you have something that the whole world needs!
1. Salt and light were highly valued in Jesus' day
 - a. The Greeks called salt *theon* during one period of their history which means divine.
 - The Romans held that the only thing more valuable than salt was the sun.
 - b. Salt was not only used for seasoning foods, but also for preserving meat in a day when there was no refrigeration.
 - It was very effective.
 - c. Light, of course, has always been necessary for seeing,
 - and in almost every age has been used to refer not only to physical seeing,
 - but also to understanding.

TRANS> Everyone would think that the salt of the earth and the light of the world would be something other than a simple disciple of Christ!

2. But if you are the blessed man or woman that Jesus described in the Beatitudes...
 - a. Then as the salt of the earth, you are what the world needs...
 - This fallen world is like unsavoury meat that is ready to spoil...
 - Ecclesiastes describes the world without salt—it is all vanity and emptiness.
 - But you are salt,
 - able to season the world with the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ to make it acceptable to God!
 - You carry with you the very thing the world needs—
 - The blessed life that Jesus gives to all who come to Him.
 - b. And as light, you are what the world needs.
 - 1) First of all, the light is needed to expose the darkness.
 - As you live out the Christian life,
 - people will see the error and failure in their own way of thinking and living.

- If a person has always lived in the dark sewer,
 - he has no idea what it is like to live in the kingdom of God.
- As a disciple of Christ, you bring light into the darkness and expose the mess that He is in...
 - Sometimes your light will be hated,
 - but sometimes it will be welcomed.
 - In either case, it is just what the world needs to show them what they really are before God...
 - a world that is ruined.

2) Secondly, the light is needed to explain the darkness.

- Many people know that the world is in trouble,
 - but they don't know why—they don't know what is wrong.
 - They may think the problem is poverty or a negative environment or genetic disorders.
- When you come into their darkness as the light of the world,
 - you show them that the problem is with man's rebellion against God.
 - This is the doctrine you carry with your life...
 - Not that poverty and environment and genetic disorders are not real problems—
 - but the light you have leads them to the real root of the problem, not just to the symptoms.
 - It is the rebellious human heart that has brought down the wrath of God upon this world.
 - You are a carrier of that message to the dark world who helps them to see what is wrong.

3) Thirdly, the light is needed to show the way out of darkness.

- No one is really going to admit the real problem—at least the depth of it—
 - until he first knows that there is a solution.
 - And if you are blessed in Christ, you have the solution...
 - It is Christ, the Saviour of the World.

- He came to seek and to save that which was lost—
- He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!
- He has shed His blood on the cross to take away our sin...
 - And given us the Holy Spirit to change our hearts.
- That is the solution and you have it!
 - This is what the world really needs!
 - They need what you have!

TRANS> Jesus says that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world because you are what the world needs.

II. But Jesus warns you about the possibility of losing your saltiness and hiding your light!

A. Now the only way that this can happen is when you forget what you are in Christ!

1. What I mean is,

- If you cease to be poor in spirit, mourning because of your sin, hungering and thirsting for righteousness...
 - being merciful, pure in heart, and a peacemaker because of Christ...
 - If you move a way from Christ...
 - you will then cease to be salt and light!

2. Your value to the world lies in the fact that you are so radically different because you have Christ.

a. For example:

- You help people to see their own need of Christ because you live among them as one who clearly sees **your** need.
- You help others to hunger and thirst after righteousness because you live among them as one who is hungering and thirsting for righteousness.
- You help others to see the riches of Christ's mercy by demonstrating mercy in your own walk...
 - not striving against your neighbour, but seeking to do Him good.
- You testify against their hypocrisy by your purity of heart before the God before whom you have been stripped by the gospel.

b. Salt is valuable because it is not like unsavoury meat that is about to rot.

- Light is valuable because it is not like the darkness that it penetrates.

- The very reason they are beneficial is because they are so different...
 - You carry the truth of Heaven with you wherever you go and that is what affects people the most.
 - It is not your personality or your charisma or your intelligence they need to see, but the saviour you embraced at the cross.
- It is entirely wrong for Christians to suppose that they will help the world the most by becoming as much like the world as they can.
 - You help the world most when you are what the Beatitudes describe.

B. Sadly, many Christians do in fact lose their saltiness and hide their light.

1. It happens when you move away from what you are as a Christian,
 - Jesus shows how utterly useless you become!
 - a. He says that salt is good for nothing but to be thrown out on the path and trodden under foot!
 - The salt with which Jesus was familiar was the salt that was found around the Dead Sea.
 - It was mixed with impurities, and it was not uncommon for all the sodium chloride to leach out and leave nothing but gypsum.
 - Such salt would be thrown out on the path and trampled.
 - Christians who are no longer living before the reality of God revealed in Christ have nothing to offer the world.
 - Their lives have lost the impact that they ought to have.
 - b. Likewise, Jesus talks about how light, as long as it is there, cannot be hidden.
 - If you are living in the truth of who you are, who God is, and who Jesus is,
 - you will have an impact on the world!
 - Your light can no more be hidden than a city set on top of a hill!
 - If the city is there, it will be seen!
 - Christ did not make you light in order that He might hide you away, but in order that you might shine for the glory of God!
 - In you, He has chosen to display His mercy for all eternity.
 - It is not His intention to hide you under a bucket after He has set you on fire for Him!

2. But perhaps you have lost your edge as a Christian.
 - Perhaps you have very little influence on those around you.
 - a. Well I say to you that the solution is not to focus on being salt and light...
 - Jesus does not command you to be salt and light...
 - The solution is to go back to your first principles as a Christian...
 - Then you will be salt and light.
 - b. The solution is to come back to the reality of who you are in Christ—
 - A poor sinner who desperately needs Him.
 - A redeemed sinner who has received so much from Him, that you see yourself as a debtor to all.
 - That is what will make you salt and light again in this world!
 - That is what will make you stand out again!

TRANS> Sometimes, the very reason you stop being salty and shining brightly is because of your efforts to be salt and light!

- C. You do not need to become something else to make a difference for Jesus in this world!
 1. Some have tried to make a difference by going to the monastery.
 - a. Such persons suppose that by shutting themselves off from the world, they will be more salty and shine more brightly.
 - But Jesus did not pray that God would remove us from the world,
 - but rather that He would keep us from the evil.
 - He doesn't want you to be poor in spirit in a cloister some where,
 - but right in this world.
 - b. It is not by withdrawing from an ordinary calling as a husband, a wife, a parent, a labourer or a professional that your light shines...
 - It is rather by living out the life of the blessed man of the beatitudes in each of these callings that you will be salt and light.
 - The world needs to see the redeemed man living in the world that God made,
 - fulfilling the calling that God has given him.
 - That is the context in which your light will shine.

- c. There are many different ways to go to the monastery!
 - You can do it by going to bible study all the time or praying all the time without a view to really knowing God or living for God.
 - What happens is that instead of actually feeding on the word so that Christ becomes your life,
 - you feed on the fact that you are doing all these Christian things.
 - No longer are you truly poor in spirit and mourning over your sin or hungering for righteousness.
 - Nor are you merciful to others and seeking peace with them.
 - You could care less about your neighbour because you have to go to Bible study or go to pray.
 - Not that the man of the beatitudes will not study the word and pray...
 - But that does not become an end in itself—
 - He studies and prays because He wants to know God and be filled with the life of Christ each day.

TRANS> Others completely reject the monastery idea—

- 2. They decide that the best way to be salt and light is to have a special ministry of some kind...
 - a. But in effect, they end up doing the same thing the monastery person does!
 - 1) They neglect their ordinary calling in order to go and do ministry!
 - 2) To them,
 - the ministry on Friday night (or whenever it is) is more important than their job on Monday morning,
 - and reaching out to the neighbour is more important than discipling their own wife and children.
 - 3) The end result is that that this person does not shine in the very place where salt and light is most needed.
 - For him, you are salt and light by doing certain things rather than by living as Christ's disciple all the time.
 - You must not look at your regular calling as something that gets in the way of being salt and light!
 - It is in living for God right where He has placed you that you are salt and light.

- b. What's more,
 - this person often loses sight of his need of Christ and ceases to hunger for Him because he fills himself up with his ministry instead.
 - He becomes proud of his ministry and his accomplishments...
 - and then he begins to try to make the gospel more attractive—
 - not in God's way, but in his own way.
 - He may begin to water down the gospel like Robert Schuller who says that he doesn't talk about the negative stuff like sin...
 - because he doesn't want to turn people away from Jesus.
 - Or like Kenneth Copeland who preaches that if you come to Christ, you won't get sick any more and will never be poor.
 - Such a person ceases to be salt and light in the world and becomes good for nothing but to be cast out and trampled under foot.
3. Now I don't mean to say that it is always wrong to do some sort of ministry or to get away from it all for prayer and contemplation...
- Both of these are commended in scripture in their rightful place.
 - But the problem is when these things move you away from what it really means to be a Christian everyday!

TRANS> Examine yourself—

- What is the nature of the salt and light in you?
 - Is it artificial salt and light that comes from you trying to be salt and light?
 - Or is it the real thing that grows out of the blessed relationship with God that is described in the Beatitudes?
 - The relationship that always results when the living Christ is truly at the centre of your whole being?

But make no mistake...

III. Jesus does command you to let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

- A. He is introducing a whole new section in His sermon with these words in which He is going to tell you **how** to let your light shine...
- And here in verse 16,

- He reminds you of two very important things to keep in mind as He begins to unfold so many practical ways to let your light shine.
1. First of all, that you are to let it shine before men.
 - a. We have just looked at this point, but I think it bears repeating again...
 - b. If you glance over some of the instructions He gives in the rest of chapter five and six,
 - You can clearly see that His concern is for what you are in the everyday world...
 - In the world where you bump up against sinners who mistreat you...
 - And in the world where there are women to lust after
 - And difficulties in marriage
 - and vows that must be taken
 - and hard jobs that must be done for the government
 - and enemies
 - and people with needs
 - and worship services to attend
 - and possessions to take care of
 - and things that will make us worry.
 - c. It is in such a world that you, like Him, are to let your light shine!
 2. Secondly, your deeds are to stand out because they are good deeds!
 - It is when people see your good works that your light will shine.
 - To stand out, these deeds must be truly good deeds or fine deeds.
 - a. They are good when they are in accordance with God's word.
 - As we shall see, Jesus is doing nothing other than expounding God's law in this section...
 - He is expounding it to His own generation so as to correct all the ways that they had twisted it and distorted it.
 - They had become masters at altering it so that they could look like they were keeping it when they weren't.
 - b. Secondly, they are good when they are done for the glory of God.
 - Really, this is one of the main problems that Jesus had to address.
 - Works ere being done by men who were trying to impress other men rather than to honour God...
 - And so they had an appearance of being good, but were really rotten.
 - And because they were rotten,

- they really didn't smell right even to people who could not really see the hypocrisy...
- The onlookers could tell that something was wrong.

B. And this brings us back to our main point...

1. The only way you can do good works that truly glorify the Father is to begin with the Beatitudes!
 - a. To meet Christ crucified and see that you have nothing to commend you to God.
 - To mourn over your sin and misery,
 - To give up the government of your own life and turn it all over to Him...
 - To hunger and thirst for the righteousness that He offers...
 - To be truly merciful and pure and a peacemaker...
 - To gladly suffer for His sake.
 - b. This is the starting point.
 - You do not start with doing good works...
 - You come to Christ in your desperate need, broken and helpless...
 - And He is the One who begins to work in your life!

TRANS> You don't have in light to let shine before men unless you have begun with Christ

2. Let me see if I can show you how the Beatitudes are the foundation of some of Jesus' exhortations about how to let your light shine...
 - a. Take the matter of giving to the poor and praying in chapter six...
 - 1) Here Jesus condemns those who give and pray...
 - not because they are impressed with God, but because they are impressed with their own giving and praying!
 - There is a sense in which they are trying to let their light shine—
 - they are drawing attention to their giving and their praying so that everyone will know about it!
 - but all they are really doing is spreading more darkness by their religious acts.
 - 2) But things are different if you begin with the Beatitudes...
 - When you have met Christ crucified,
 - you give and pray to God because you are so impressed who He is!

- You have seen His glory in the face of Jesus Christ!
 - You have seen His love that sent Jesus to die for your sins!
 - You have seen His justice that demanded the blood of Jesus to atone for your sins.
 - You have seen His holiness and wisdom in the beauty of Jesus' life.
 - You have seen His readiness to bless all who come to Him.
 - And so now your giving and praying is not to impress Him or others...
 - You come to Him because you are thrilled with Him!
 - You live in relation to His glory that you have seen in Jesus Christ.
 - In this way, your light shines.
- b. Now take the matter of adultery and fretting over riches...
- Jesus instructs that when God forbids adultery,
 - it is not only the act, but also the lustful desire that is forbidden...
 - Likewise, with riches,
 - It is not only stealing and cheating, but also coveting and concerning yourself about what you will eat and what you will wear.
 - Unless you have met Christ and seen the glory and beauty of the righteousness He brings into the world...
 - You have no foundation for ceasing to lust and covet...
 - But when you have seen Him in the gospel of righteousness,
 - you hunger and thirst for righteousness...
 - And so there is in you a hunger to replace the hunger for the seductress and for wealth and prosperity!
 - Your light shines because you are not only avoiding the things that are forbidden,
 - but hungering for something that is even better!
 - How thin is that external righteousness that tries not to hunger, but really has nothing else greater to hunger for!
 - What can you offer to others but prohibition and threat of punishment?
 - Your light shines in respect to lust and covetousness only when you have the righteousness that Jesus offers to fill you instead.

- I don't mean that you will never struggle with these sins of adultery and covetousness...
 - but the good news is that in Christ, you have something far better to turn to.
- c. And then there are those laws Jesus addresses that have to do with forgiving those who have wronged you, and loving enemies and fulfilling duties...
 - The person who has experienced the beatitudes does not approach anyone with a "you owe me" attitude!
 - The "you owe me" attitude has been purged from his system because Jesus Christ has lavished upon him so much mercy and grace that he is a debtor forever!
 - He sees himself as the man that was given the debt of 10,000 talents, and so every debt that is owed to him is nothing in comparison!
 - Once again, I do not mean to say that you will not struggle with this if you have met Jesus Christ...
 - You will have to fight with the "you owe me attitude" in your heart,
 - but at the same time, you know how out of place that attitude is because of all that Christ has done for you.
 - You have in yourself light to live out,
 - and Jesus' instruction guides you in letting that light shine before men.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, I urge you...

- Do not try to move into this section on the exposition of God's law unless you have first met Jesus in the Beatitudes...
 - That is, unless you have first come to Him as a ruined sinner and been saved.
 - Until you have been blessed by Him—
 - the law will do nothing but condemn you...
 - if you come to Him as broken and needy for the righteousness He supplies by the cross—
 - Then you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world...
 - And Jesus will guide you in letting your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven!