

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-16

One of the many cries of the human heart is a cry for significance. We want to matter. Whether it's a top athlete, businessman, a social cause, we want to be significant. We don't like the thought of feeling useless, of not mattering, that leads us to despair. Humanity is on a search to matter. To be something and do something that has value and purpose. That pursuit takes us in a million directions, and unless it takes us to God, we will find ourselves coming up short. Only in relation to God are we satisfied at the deepest level.

This morning we are going to examine the words of Jesus as He, in the sermon on the mount, gives His disciples, and us by extension, a significance that is beyond our dreams.

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.

Pray.

The Condition For Mission

Jesus uses two analogies here to describe our mission to the world—be salt and be light to the world. As a foundation to understanding our mission, we must first understand the nature of the world we are ministering to.

So the first image Jesus uses is salt. Why do people use salt? In our day the primary purpose of salt is to supply flavor. In Jesus' day, although flavor was probably in view, the primary function of salt was for preservation. You couldn't go to the store to pull meat from one refrigerator, buy it, and go home and stick it in another. You know what happens when meat gets left out. We've been victim of our power getting cut off before while going on vacation. Not pretty.

What happens? Meat goes bad. It spoils. It decays. It rots. If you insert salt into the equation, however, the rotting stops. Jesus is saying the world is rotting—it's getting worse. This is an analogy, of course, He's talking about people, and He's talking about the morality of those people.

The second image Jesus uses is light. Light is good for when you want to see and things are dark. Without light, it's dark. Have you ever been in total darkness? Complete darkness without a glimmer of light is probably more rare than we realize. It's unnerving, you can't make out even your hand in front of your face, much less a path to walk. It usually ends up running into something. Complete, utter darkness. Here, again, Jesus is talking about morality, darkness refers to evil, the world's moral compass has been corrupted, there's no knowledge of God.

So Jesus describes the world is two ways: it's decaying and it's dark.

Now, this rubs against us, and it rubs against the world for sure. And we'd deny it. We aren't decaying, we are advancing! Look at all we've done in education, technology, medicine, politics, and secular moral agenda. In the past we have been primitive, but we've advanced. Jesus says, No, you are decaying. You think you are moving towards life, but you are moving toward death. And we aren't in the dark, are you kidding, we've been illuminated with reason and philosophy, the enlightenment. We have knowledge and direction. Jesus says, No, you are still in the dark.

The moral condition of the world goes back to the beginning of humanity with Adam and Eve. When they sinned against God the entire human race was cursed with a sin nature. Our morality became corrupt at the most fundamental level. Instead of prizing and valuing God we began prizing and valuing ourselves.

2 Tim. 3:13 ...evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

What is the antidote to Decay and Darkness? It is salt and light... that's where we turn now.

The Call To Mission

When Jesus calls His disciples to be salt and light to the world, that wasn't random. He's connecting them to the needs of the world, but He's also connecting them to God's mission all along. Whenever we read the Bible we read it with a narrow lens and a wide lens. Take a picture with your phone held vertical and put it in landscape mode. This is one of those times that a panoramic pic is very helpful in helping us understand what's happening here.

In the beginning of the Bible we see Triune God create man to be in relationship with Him. Things are blessed and wonderful in the garden. Man sins and is kicked out of that garden. But God determines He is going to rescue humanity, and the rescuer is going to come through the line of Eve.

So much of the OT is tracing this seed, who is He and when is He going to come. God chooses Abraham and says,

12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God, in His strategy to bless all the nations of the earth, chooses Abraham and His descendants, which would become Israel. Israel would be a blessing to other nations as they worshiped God and walked in the ways. But they fail, miserably, over and over again. Idolatry, self-worship, and rejection of God's Word is what they are good at, not being holy and missional.

God pours out judgement on the faithless Israelites. Israel's primary failure was that they rejected the Son of God. It's only in Jesus that someone can have their sins forgiven. It's only in Jesus that good works can be done. It's only in Jesus that one can be made righteous. Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that Israel was called to do. He is the faithful, true Israelite, who alone is holy, and in whom all the nations are blessed.

Even up to Jesus time, as we will see in Matthew, one of the themes is God's rejection of their empty religion. We saw even in chapter 3, John the Baptist, Brood of Vipers!, "8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Now, what we see at this point in Matthew 5 is breathtaking. Jesus calls His disciples the light of the world. You are the light of the world. What's already been clearly spoken in Matthew 4 is that Jesus is this light that has dawned. John 8:12, "I am the light of the world." And now Jesus is applying it to the disciples. So what we have, in effect, is a transferring of the mission of God that was given to Abraham, fulfilled in Jesus, now given to the Lord's disciples, the church.

This declaration of Jesus to the disciples would have been shocking. He's just been going through the beatitudes telling them, you are blessed if you mourn sin, hunger for righteousness, are meek, peacemaker, pure in heart. They would have been thinking, who are these people, who can do that? And then Jesus turns to

them and say, You ARE the blessed ones. You see the blessedness that Jesus has just been describing, you are salt and you are light. And he frames it within mission. Grace upon Grace!

1 Peter 1:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Eph. 3, “through the church the manifold wisdom of God is being made known...”

This is who you ARE, so be salty and be light for the world. We don't get a command to be salty, but it's implied. He says emphatically, let your light shine. Let it shine. He contrasts both analogies with the irrational nature of using impure salt (which doesn't work), and light under a basket (which doesn't work). You are blessed to be a blessing, and anything other than that is irrational and useless. This is what you do, if you are salt, this is what you do, if you are light, this is what you do.

What does it mean to be salt and light to the world?

Jesus does not clearly spell out what our function of salt and light in the world is. It's easy to push analogies too far. Some people put the salt in the category of godly living and godly influence on culture, where the gospel is not explicit in word, but explicit in deed. And light is seen as pure gospel proclamation. Or salt is social influence, and light is influence with the truth.

I think our best and safest clue is given in vs. 16 as Jesus interprets for us, **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.**

Light is clearly “good works” here, and I think the thrust of the passage has salt and light essentially doing this one thing, good works. Or, put it this way, being a blessing to the world.

Our question is less, what is salt and what is light, and more, what are good works?

A good work is an action that images God. We are image bearers of God, and good works are when we rightly image God's character and draw people to worship God. This is what Israel was to do. Good works are the fruits in keeping with repentance, it's what we do when we worship Jesus.

For us, whether salt and light are this parallel or not, we must proclaim the gospel in word and deed. We can't do one or the other. Our call is to both. We must promote the gospel with our lives and proclaim the gospel with our lips.

Two dangers that cause our mission to misfire:

1. Our mission misfires when we attempt mission by becoming like the world

We see in His salt and light analogy, the usefulness of the salt and light depends upon their difference to the world. This is the first big error in mission, right, we become too much like those we are trying to reach, to the point where we have nothing to offer. There's no gospel in word or deed.

1 Peter 1:14 “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

Most scholars that I looked at, pointed to the fact that salt becomes impure. Salt does not lose its saltiness, it's a very stable compound, but what can happen, is it loses its saltiness through contamination with impurities like sand. Are you an impure christian?

Blending in with the world can be a great thing provided it is missional, and provided you don't compromise your faith and holiness. This is Paul's argument in 1 Cor. about the Christians' freedom, there's a bucket of non-essentials that can come and go, and should be leveraged for the sake of love and mission. To the Jew he became a Jew, and to the Gentile he became a Gentile. The point is that you want to do whatever you can to maximize the chance someone will listen to the gospel. Poor Timothy had so much zeal he underwent circumcision! I like to say we are to be chameleons without compromise. In the world but not of the world.

The light is hidden. We've gone undercover. Are you an undercover Christian? SO THAT they may SEE your good works. Good works are practical and visible. **“ 14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. “ phil 2:14-15**

“Christians are to be a moral disinfectant in a world where moral standards are low, constantly changing, or non-existent.” - scholar

2. Our mission misfires when we attempt mission by becoming separate from the world

Salt and Light are no good to the world when they don't come in contact with the world. Salt has to be rubbed in, and light has to shine in the darkness. Salt in the pantry and light under a basket don't do anyone any good. Jesus is calling for “active presence” in the world. We are to be in the world, but not of the world.

When most people think of becoming separate from the world, you can think of the monastic traditions that completely removed themselves from civilization to live in caves, or monasteries. Praise God how God used some of these groups of people to preserve the written word, but on matters of love and mission, they had completely missed it. God doesn't call Christians to move into a cave, or move out into the desert.

Considering matters of love and mission, it's easy for us to see that we shouldn't move into the desert, but the question for us is, how might we be separating ourselves from our world right here in Cary.

How might we be creating our own insular Christian community? How many nonbelievers do you come in contact with over the course of a day or a week? Are you rubbing shoulders with the lost? What is the posture of your heart, are you wanting more contact with lostness, or less? examples.

The temptation is real to become separatistic. To do life with only Christians. Eat Christian chicken, shop at Hobby Lobby, and . Only go into shops you know are run by Christians. Take jobs with Christians. Make friends with only Christians. There's an ease and a comfort about that. And a real joy. God loves Christian community! It's an enormous blessing. We should have that. Community is huge. But if community is not on mission, then we've missed our full calling.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Flight into the invisible is a denial of our call. A community of Jesus that seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow Jesus.”

We must permeate the world in which we live. “agents of redemption” . Counterculture does not mean absent from culture. It means bringing Christ's Lordship and love to bear on every aspect of culture. If we separate, the world will not pay any attention to us, so the world will continue to deteriorate, they won't be blessed, we will be disobedient, and God will not be worshiped.

That brings us finally to look at the climax of our mission.

The Climax of Mission

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.

Our missional activity begins with our blessedness, moves toward the blessing of the world, and finally, to the glory of God the Father. **“so that”** they may see your good works and... give glory to your Father in heaven.

This is why we exist, for the glory of God. It's the driving motive behind everything the christian does, Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

This stirs up the question of motive for us. Why do we do the things that we do? Why do we live on mission? If we operate with any other motive than the glory of God, then we are sinning? At that point we are worshiping another god, an idol of some sort. Self-glory. The glory of our own reputation or ability. The glory of some social or religious cause, that might sound good, but God's not the focus.

That's the tension in the “being seen” part. Being seen is not bad. In some ways it's neutral. It's why you are being seen that matters. Don't be like the Pharisees who do things to be seen for their glory. Be seen for the glory of God.

Our grand fixation must be the glory of God. That's what we want. That's what we love. That's what we burn for as christians.

John Piper says it very well, “Missions exists because worship doesn't.” Missions exists because worship doesn't. There are over 5 billion people that do not give glory to God. That's not meant to make you think of formal missionaries over seas, that's supposed to land in your daily life. Your coworkers. Your friends. Your actual neighbors and people you come in contact with at the gym or coffee shop, or restaurants you go to.

We must step into these places and into every conversation with the unflinching desire to see God's worth and beauty magnified in this person, this business, or this aspect of culture.

That should in no way overwhelm us, because these good works have already been prepared for us. The game has been rigged. Ephesians 2:10 could not be any more clear. We are God's workmanship and He has prepared these works for us to walk in.

We look to Christ who is both our example and our power. He is the True Salt and True Light who alone perfectly fulfilled the mission of God, and in whom we too are found faithful. Jesus extends the gospel commission in Matthew 5, and we will see like bookends, Jesus repeat the commission in Matthew 28

Matthew 28:18 “And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Significance? There's no greater significance than being a christian whose been called to play a pivotal role in the redemption of the world. We are the salt and light of the world. May it be so, and may we be the saltiest and most shiny crew of people around.

Let's pray.