

BEING SALT AND LIGHT

Matthew 5:13-16

Overcome the tasteless darkness.

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
February 16, 2020

I love music. I was fortunate to grow up in a musical family, and I had enough piano lessons as a child to learn to read music. But my practice of music has been much more informal—guitar chord charts or learning things by ear. In formal music, sometimes at the end of a piece, there will be repeat of a theme or refrain. This is called a *coda*. In less formal or contemporary music, it's called a *tag*. We will often tag a song in the Connexion with a repeated line or chorus.

Today's sermon is sort of a *tag* sermon, or if you want to be more formal, a *coda* sermon. Last week we finished a four-week series called "Catch," and we are in between that series and Transfiguration Sunday next week. Roy Beth looked up the Scriptures that are assigned for this Sunday. We don't follow those assignments very much, but there's nothing wrong with them. She came into my office and said, "The Gospel is salt and light from the Sermon on the Mount. What do you think?" I said, "I love that text! And I haven't preached on it in a while. Let's do it."

The "Catch" series was all about welcoming and witnessing—being hospitable to guests in church and sharing our faith with others. The salt and light text is about how we are to live in the world to point others to God. So this is sort of a tag on "Catch." Welcoming and witnessing are very important themes in the teaching of Jesus.

Matthew gives a good synopsis of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Traditionally, it was believed that Jesus delivered this sermon on a hill outside of Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. The hill is called Mt. Eremos. Today there is a church there that commemorates the Sermon on the Mount. Although the top of the mount is some 650 feet above the sea of Galilee, it is still about 80 feet below sea level in altitude, making it one of the shortest summits in the world. Near the top of the hill, there is an indentation in the hillside that forms a natural amphitheater where Jesus might have delivered this teaching.

Jesus began the sermon with a series of sayings that we call the Beatitudes. Blessed are the people who share these qualities: poor in spirit, mourners, meek, thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and persecuted. The Beatitudes are a whole different sermon,

but they characterize Christian discipleship. These are the marks of a Christian identity.

Then Jesus used two very common, down-to-earth examples to encourage his listeners to exhibit their identity before the world: salt and light.

*“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”*¹ “You” there is plural and emphatic, like “You, yourselves” or if Jesus was from southern Israel, “All y’all.” “All y’all are the salt of the earth.”

Salt today is fairly inconsequential stuff, cheap and abundant. But in Jesus’ time it was much more valuable because it was used many ways. Salt was actually used as currency. Roman soldiers were paid in salt. It was called *salarium*, from which we get the word “salary.”

Salt works in several ways. It can create thirst. That’s why they put salt on your popcorn at the movies—so you’ll buy a \$12 Coke! That’s why you don’t drink salt water; it only makes you more thirsty.

Howard Hendricks was a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary who in his younger days was preaching a revival in a little church in west Texas. At some point in the sermon, he used the phrase, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” Everybody knows that, right? After the service, a sunburned old man in cowboy boots approached Hendricks and said, “Preacher, you’re wrong about one thing. You can lead a horse to water *and* make him drink.”

“How’s that?” Hendricks said.

The old rancher replied, “You just feed him salt.”²

If we live our Christian lives visibly in the world, we will create a thirst in people to know what we know, to be like we are, and once they taste the living water of Jesus, they will never thirst again.

Salt also provides flavor to food. Too much salt is bad for you; it raises your blood pressure and all that. But food without any salt is bland, even tasteless (says the guy who never had to go on a salt-free diet). The Christian life, living the Jesus way, gives a flavor to life that does not come

from worldly pleasures. As exciting and interesting as the thrills of life outside of God might seem, it soon becomes tasteless and dull.

It's almost cliché in art how a prodigal lifestyle turns sour after a while. Of course, Jesus had a story about that. In the last year, I've seen two movies about great rock stars, Freddie Mercury of Queen and Elton John. Both movies told the story of how all the excesses of stardom—fame, money, sex, drugs, and so forth—left them empty, alone, burnt out, and disillusioned.

Life in Christ is full of flavor—meaningful, purposeful, effective, fruitful, and highly entertaining. It blesses the believer and creates thirst in the unbeliever who sees the kind of life Christians lead. Have you found this to be true?

In a previous church, I had a conversation after worship one day with a woman who was in a Bible study I was teaching. She said, "I got a chance to witness this week!" Her face was just glowing.

She was a nurse, and one of her doctors had asked to speak with her privately. She thought she was in trouble. But he asked, "How do you do what you do?"

She was kind of surprised by that, and she said, "What do you mean?"

The doctor said, "How do you keep your attitude up all the time? With all you've been through, and everything that goes on at the hospital, you are always happy and hopeful and positive in your outlook. How do you do that?"

The woman said to me, "A few years ago I would probably have said something like, 'Oh, I don't know, I have some good friends who help me through.' But I have grown so much in Bible study and the church that I just opened my mouth and the words came out, 'It's my spiritual life, my prayer life, and my friends in the church that give me strength to face each day.'"

When the doctor heard that, he just leaned back against the wall, looking totally shocked. Like maybe it had never occurred to him that somebody's faith could be that real.

Then this wonderful Christian woman told me, "When I heard those words coming out of my mouth, it was like I wasn't even saying them. They were being said through me. And my heart just went 'Boom!'"

My response to her was, “You were already making a witness with your life long before you ever spoke those words. It was the way you live that opened up the door to speak the words.” That’s a life full of flavor.

Salt in the ancient world was also used as a preservative. There were no systems of refrigeration available. Like salt, Christian life preserves the values of God, the timeless, positive, universal principles that make the world livable. Paul gave a list of these values as “fruits of the Spirit”: “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*”³ There is so much rotten, stinking stuff in our world today; I could spend the rest of my time making a list for you. But you know what I’m talking about. Our faith in Christ allows us to preserve and practice the values that keep us from utter chaos. This faith is the hope of the world.

I was visiting with a new friend a week or two ago, and he was telling me about probably the lowest point he had ever experienced in his life. He had been arrested for fraud and extradited to a jail in Florida, where he had no friends or family. He went in with just the clothes on his back, so they issued him a prison toothbrush with his other supplies. That toothbrush was so rough that it tore up his gums. With everything else, now his gums were bleeding. So at the next meal time, he asked the guys sitting around him if they were not going to use their little salt packets, could he have them to make a salt water wash for his mouth? A few of the men complied, and my friend started collecting salt packets at meal times.

There was one guy, a young African-American prisoner, who came by at every meal and dropped a little salt packet on his tray. He didn’t say anything; he just dropped his gift and shuffled on. But that act of kindness, repeated three times a day until my friend got out of jail, left him thinking thoughts like this: “There’s still good in the world. There are still good people in the world. I can have hope. I can make it through this.” Before he left the jail a couple of months later, my friend had rededicated his life to the faith of his childhood, the faith that he had neglected in his time of prosperity, and the faith that was missing in his time of calamity. But it came back, and so did he.

The other encouraging image Jesus uses in this text is the light of the world: “*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.*

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”⁴

When Jesus said “city on a hill,” the people knew exactly what he was talking about. In the hills just north of Capernaum is the town of Safed. It was then and still is a city of Jewish learning and spiritual life. At night, from the seashore in Galilee, Safed could be seen shining brightly in the distance, a city on a hill.

The lamp Jesus was talking about was a little terra cotta oil lamp, no bigger than your palm. They would put olive oil in the lamp and light the wick, and it would burn with a low flame. It was not much light, but on a lampstand it could give a little light to a room. Under a cover, like a basket, it would give no light at all.

So we are the light of the world. But actually, we’re not. Jesus is the Light of the world; we’re just the windows. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”⁵* I think it makes more sense to say Jesus is the Light of the world; we are letting his light shine through us.

There’s a famous story about the Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson. As a child, he was standing at his window one evening, and he saw a lamplighter coming down the street. In those days, mid-19th century, the streetlights were gas, and they had to be lit each evening and extinguished at dawn. His parents called him to supper, but young Robert stood transfixed by the lamplighter. When they came to check on him, he said, “Come look, there is a man out there punching holes in the darkness.”⁶

That’s a pretty good description of our mission as Christians. We are the light of the world, and we punch holes in the darkness. But the light is not our own. Our good works point others to the One who gives us light, the true Light of the world. He said, *“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”⁷* When we let the light of Christ shine through us, there is a double illumination: people see Jesus in us, and we see Jesus in others.

Not long ago in Dallas, Texas, a man lay near death in an alley downtown. He had been beaten and robbed. The thugs who assaulted him were long gone. Just as he felt himself losing consciousness, he saw the amber light

of the streetlight surround the head of a man bending over him. It reminded him of a halo.

When the man woke up, he was in the emergency room of the Parkland Hospital. The nurse told him that the man who brought him in was still there and wanted to see him. As soon as he stepped around the curtain, the victim of the attack said, "I want to thank you."

The rescuer said, "It was nothing."

The victim spoke again, "You know, it's funny, but when you came to help me, there in that dim light, I thought you were Jesus."

"You know," the visitor said, "that *is* funny, because when I moved toward your groaning in the alley, I thought *you* were Jesus!" Let your light shine. Others will see Jesus in you, and you will be surprised where Jesus shows up.

Let me leave you with a challenge today. This is not a pep talk. Pep talks try to encourage you to become something you're not yet. Play better defense! Execute the offense! Become the salt of the earth! Try to be the light of the world! That's not what we're saying today.

This is a proclamation. You already are the salt of the earth. You already are the light of the world. Be what you are. Live like salt: create thirst; give flavor to life; preserve the values of God. Let your light shine, so others can see more clearly the face of their Savior. All y'all are salt! All y'all are light! Jesus said so.

In the Message version, he is quoted this way:

Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening

*up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.*⁸

And all God's people said, "Amen!"

¹ Matthew 5:13.

² Howard Hendricks, "Beyond The Bottom Line," *Preaching Today* Tape No. 101.

³ Galatians 5:22-23.

⁴ Matthew 5:14-15.

⁵ John 8:12.

⁶ <https://www.billygraham.ca/stories/punching-holes-in-the-darkness/>.

⁷ Matthew 5:16.

⁸ Matthew 5:14-16, *The Message*.