

## Matthew 5:13-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### Salt and Light

**13** “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.

**14** “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. **15** 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.

**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 in heaven.

### The Law and the Prophets

**17** “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. **18** For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter,[a] not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. **19** Therefore, whoever breaks[b] one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. **20** For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

### **You---yes you!**

You---yes you--- are the salt of the earth!

You---yes you--- are the light of the world!

The use of the word “you” in this scripture is emphatic -- the word is emphasized----it’s like shouting “you” or like saying, “hey, you! Wake up! You are salt and light.”

Not only is the word emphatic, but, the Greek word used for “you” here is the plural of “you” -- so we would interpret this as y’all. We might even say all y’all are the salt and the light. These words are being spoken to individual followers of Jesus and to the whole community of faith.

This scripture also uses the word “are” - you **are** the salt of the earth and you **are** the light of the world -- the word is present tense. Jesus **doesn’t** tell his disciples that they **will be** the salt and the light of the world, or that they have the potential to be salt and light. Jesus doesn’t tell his followers to work harder to become salt and light. He tells them that they already are salt and light in a needy world. Isn’t it amazing, that somehow by God’s grace, we have the presence of God within us already and Christ’s mission for us is to sprinkle that salt around--- and to turn the light of God outward into the world.

In fact, being the salt and light is core to our identity as followers of Jesus -- it is literally who we are---just as saltiness is essential for salt and shining is essential for light --- if we are disciples, we share God’s love.

So, I wonder what might happen if we recognized this. What if we claimed our identity that Jesus gave his disciples thousands of years ago? What if we really lived as if we **are** the salt of the earth; and what if we really did let our light shine before people, so that they could see the good things we do and praise our Father who is in heaven?

Today I invite you to imagine what it might look like to be salt of the earth and light in our world. But what is it that Jesus might be saying here? As for salt, it certainly does no good sitting in a salt shaker. However, its value is great once it is mixed, in the right amounts, on our food – sprinkled on, and it’s even better when it is cooked in our food. Now, you’ve all tried food that wasn’t salted enough. It can be really bland. But the right amount of salt transforms our food doesn’t it – it brings out the natural flavors – and it can totally change the taste. So also, Christians sitting alone in the comfort of their homes keeping God’s love to themselves don’t make much difference to people outside their doors. While spending personal time with God is essential to our growth, it is the basis of our mission to turn our lives outward. One writer said that this scripture “strikes the death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private.” (NIB Commentary).

And friends, there are all kinds of people who haven’t experienced a new life in Christ. And my heart aches for those who don’t have the zest for life that comes from living with and for God. Maybe part of being the salt of the earth results in bringing God’s love into a dull and bland existence. To rub elbows with the world – and to do it in a way that brings glory to God.

Salt is not only flavorful, but it is also valuable as a preservative. And salt isn’t always pleasant. Did you ever get salt in a cut on your hand? It hurts! Or, maybe you also have put salt in a wound for its healing properties. One writer said this: “We are called to be, not the honey of the world, but the salt of the earth. Salt stings on an open wound, but it also saves one from gangrene.” (Donald Bloesch). So maybe salt is a perfect metaphor for God’s people – we are to be active agents to preserve God’s ways, but we are also sometimes irritants in calling the world to follow Jesus and not our own selfish and even sinful ways.

Maybe to be salt, we have to struggle against our culture and remind people that when we follow Jesus, our lives look different. If we are salty, we may not necessarily fit in with the crowd. Maybe being salty is going against the crowd and in favor of the oppressed. Part of our work as followers of Jesus and one of our vows at baptism is to resist evil, injustice and oppression in the world. And so maybe being salty involves doing the things Jesus came to do – feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, visiting those in prison. Maybe being salty is standing up for someone who is being bullied or working for the enactment of a living wage or talking about climate change.

I also think of salt as being gritty. And I think part of what Jesus is talking about is that we have to have grit to be a disciple of Jesus. We have to be a little tough, we can’t give up, and also – we have to be bold and courageous to do what the Holy Spirit is calling us even it sounds crazy, and even if it is something that is way beyond our comfort zone --even if it’s something that is unpopular and might get us into trouble in the world.

In 1956, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham -- it was preached as a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the American church of 1956. Listen to these powerful words:

American Christian, I must say to you what I wrote to the Roman Christians years ago: "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." You have a dual citizenry. You live both in time and eternity. Your highest loyalty is to God, and not to the mores or the folkways, the state or the nation, or any man-made institution. If any earthly institution or custom conflicts with God's will, it is your Christian duty to oppose it. You must never allow the transitory, evanescent, demands of manmade institutions to take precedence over

the eternal demands of the Almighty God. In a time when men are surrendering the high values of the faith you must cling to them, and despite the pressure of an alien generation preserve them for children yet unborn. You must be willing to challenge unjust mores, to champion unpopular causes, and to buck the status quo. You are called to be salt of the earth. You are to be the light of the world. You are to be that vitally active leaven in the lump of the nation. (“Paul’s Letter to the American Church,” Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Dr. King consistently called Christians to this salty life of resisting evil, injustice and oppression in the world so that God’s light might shine and reveal the truth. You -- yes you-- are the salt of the earth!

Jesus also says, “You -- yes you -- are the light of the world.”

Light is a familiar metaphor in scripture. Jesus said this about himself in John 9:5, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” And now Jesus has appointed us, his disciples to carry on the light – to provide illumination to the world through the witness of our good works. Jesus has appointed us to dispel the darkness in the world through our actions. And it is a sacred duty.

We are not called to carry this light on our own though. The light comes from Jesus. It’s as if Jesus is the sun and we are the moon. The sun burns brightly and provides light for the entire solar system. It doesn’t depend on the planets or the moons for its light. It generates its own light, and gives light and life to all around it. Jesus is the sun. But the moon is cold and lifeless. By itself the moon gives no light. But when the moon stands in the proper position in relation to the sun, it bathes the earth with the reflected sunlight. The light that appears to be the moonlight -- is really the light of the sun! And so it is with us and Jesus -- when we stand in proper relationship to him – when we reflect his light- we are able to shine that light around us. We can’t do it on our own power.

So, in order for us to be fully effective in being the light of the world, we’ve got to align ourselves with the source of all light, we’ve got to receive that light in our lives -- preferably on a daily basis through things like worship, reading scripture, prayer, participating in the sacraments like Holy Communion and baptism, through spiritual retreat, and in connecting with others who are part of the body of Christ.

Another key point in this scripture is this -- the scripture says that our light will shine in the world through the good things we do, and that these good things we do should be used to praise God in heaven. Our good deeds shouldn’t be done for us to get attention or praise, but for God to be praised and recognized. Such acts of goodness are highly effective ways to give God praise. One of the most impactful sentences I read in my studying this week is this: “People who reject the church and its teachings cannot so easily dismiss the witness of those of us who devote ourselves to serving others.”

Sacrificial service, love in action, draws people to Christ, even if our words don’t. Some of you will be called to prominent roles in this world as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Some of you will be called to go around the world sharing Christ. But **all of us** are called to missions in our own families and our own church and in this community. We are all called to keep our eyes and ears open -- to see and hear what Christ is calling us to do with our gifts, in our place and in our time. Bud talked last week about spiritual gifts, and I hope that you took some time to do a spiritual gifts inventory. This week I hope you will pray that God will reveal specifically how you might shine God’s light where darkness exists

I struggled this week to find the perfect examples of persons who are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. I do think of the courage and boldness, and the saltiness of Martin Luther King, Jr., in his leadership during the Civil Rights movement. I think of the light of Mother Theresa in quietly and humbly caring for the lepers of India. They are surely heroes of the faith. They inspire our imagination - they help us dream of ways to turn our lives outward in big impactful ways.

But instead of talking about those faith heroes, God provided me with a few perfect examples. At the Wednesday Night Life Dinner this week, I said hello to 6 year old Livia. And she was holding this pot holder that she told me she had made with her grandmother. She explained that it had a cross in it. And then she did the most amazing thing! She gave it to me! Livia made my day -- she shined her light into my day. And by the way, you may know that Livia is actually a professional at shining light -- she played the star of Bethlehem in the Christmas play. What a wonderful gift she gave me on Wednesday! Not only did she give me something that she had made and that was special to her, but it reminded me of another person who was a light in my life.

You see when I was Livia's age, I made the same kind of potholders on a little loom with **my** grandmother. And it brought back some wonderful memories about the time I spent with my grandmother --- we were together most every day. And I spent a lot of time thinking about how important she was in my life --- how she showered me with love, but never let me get by with acting a fool. I remember my grandmother as being both salt and light in my life. And Livia's loving act had reminded me of my own grandmother's constant and steady love.

The next day as I continued to struggle writing this sermon, I was interrupted and had some business to take care of in the Family Life Center. And when I got over there, I could hear a lot of noise and commotion going on in the kitchen. And I was invited to see what was going on. It was a group of women known as the Dorothy Collier Network. They were cooking a bunch of chicken casseroles -- they had the biggest mixing bowl I have ever seen. They were stirring up chicken and noodles. They were making chocolate cakes. You see they provide meals for families who have lost a loved one. Their job is to shine a little light during the darkness of grief. They provide some comfort food during the process of saying good-bye when someone has died. They allow a family to gather together and enjoy a meal -- to rest and relax and to connect and support each other through the pain. It might seem like a simple thing ---- but it is certainly a beacon of Christ's light in the midst of the darkness of pain.

This week was mostly a really cloudy, rainy, cold week. It can be kind of depressing when we have so much dark weather like that. But when I left the smells of chocolate cake and chicken casserole and came out of the Family Life Center that day, the clouds had cleared away and the sun was finally shining -- it was so bright and I was so used to the dark that it was kind of shocking. I felt like a mole coming out of a dark hole. As the sunlight hit me in the face, it was like God was saying.....

---the light of Christ is all around you -- every day--through the works of God's people;  
---and that light makes a huge difference.

By the time I got back to my sermon writing, I could see more clearly some ways that we can turn God's love outward. It can be done in big ways and in small ways.

**So, today I leave you with three tips for living in the light:**

1. Would you draw near to Christ, who is the light of the world.

2. I highly recommend that you hang out with some of God's people like Livia and the Dorothy Collier group, because they too are the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

3. And then, would you live in to your identity as a follower of Jesus and turn your life outward. Because ---

Jesus says that **you, yes you, are** the salt of the earth.

Jesus says that **you, yes you, are** the light of the world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.