

“Salt and Light”

August 19, 2007
Dr. Ritch Boerckel

Scriptural Foundation: Matthew 5:13-16, NIV

We have spent seven weeks in Jesus' introduction to this message, which are The Beatitudes. The rest of the sermon flows from those eight statements regarding the description of the Christian. We move from theoretical definition of a Christian to a functional definition of a Christian; that is to say a definition that describes how we interact, how we live, and what our influence is in this world.

Salt and Light

¹³*“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.*

¹⁴*“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

How can I make a difference in the world? God has placed within each one of us a desire to leave behind something more than a gravestone. God has created us with a yearning to live with a purpose, to influence the world around us, and to leave a mark that weathers time. It is this desire that prompted Robert Frost to author these familiar lines:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.¹

I believe Mr. Frost did not want to die before he had time to make his life something to count in this world, but, Mr. Frost, in his yearnings did not answer a very important question: where could we walk in order to make our life count for something and in order to pursue a path that really matters? What is this path?

The truth is, there are many in this world who are walking, walking, walking, mile upon mile and yet walking in vain because they are walking in circles. They are walking on the path of worldly power or wealth or prestige or prominence or pleasure and pride. As a result, when they pass from this plane, despite having walked mile upon mile, there is nothing left of influence, and they are like those footprints that are left behind in the sand. The ocean comes and washes them away and it is though they never really existed.

How is it that we can make a lasting mark? The world whispers to us that we need to be tough and hard for this is a hard and tough world. We need to push our way to the top of the pile. We need to make our own rules and not let anyone make them for us. We need to position ourselves with the right connections in order to get along. We need cash, truckloads of it, in order to influence this world.

Listen to Jesus' description to a “world changer”. He says that a world changer is “poor in spirit”,² recognizing their spiritual poverty. A world changer is one who “mourns”³ and one who is sorrowful over his or her own sin. A world changer is one who is “gentle”⁴ and submissive to the will of the Father above. A world changer is one who is “hungry and thirsty”⁵ for real righteousness in a real world and doing what is right. A world changer is one who is

¹ *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*

² Matthew 5:3

³ Matthew 5:4

⁴ Matthew 5:5

⁵ Matthew 5:6

“merciful”⁶, willing and ready to forgive others when they are wronged and to be “tender and compassionate” in the face of others’ failings. A world changer is “pure in heart”⁷ “peacemaker”⁸ who is persecuted⁹.

Someone may ask the question, “What impact could this kind of person possibly have in this tough world? Are not such people too feeble and too faint to influence a world that is so hard? Someone may protest, “Pastor, that description sounds really good in a sermon on Sunday morning, but get real, this is not the way life really works.” Jesus answers such a protest, “Oh, really! Don’t you think that I know about the hardness of this world? Don’t you think that I know about its toughness? Don’t you think I, who felt the world’s curse and mockery, who felt the world’s spitting and beatings, and who ultimately felt the world’s cross, know? Yet, I have overcome the world.”

Friend, if you wish to influence the world with the life that God gave you, you must follow Jesus' strategy for such influence to make a lasting impact. What is the strategy? Jesus tells us what His strategy is: you are to be salt and you are to be light. He employs two metaphors, salt and light, to point to the positive influence each of these have. Salt influences meat when it comes in contact with it. Light influences darkness when it enters a room. These two metaphors indicate the influence that the Christian is to have in this world, influences that will be recognized not just in time but forever and ever. In laying out these two metaphors for us He is giving us a strategy. He is acting as our life-coach.

If you follow sports you recognize coaches in the sporting realm often have two different and contrasting philosophies. Some coaches will say that the best offense is a good defense, that is to say that it does not concern them how many points the team scores they are not going to let the opposing team score any. Other coaches have the opposite philosophy: the best offense is a good offense; score as much as you want we will score more.

Jesus provides us, in these two metaphors, a balance between defense and offense. Salt is a reference to a defensive strategy and a defensive influence that believers have. Light is a reference to the offensive influence that we have for Christ and for God’s glory.

We will look at two prongs to this strategy which Jesus lays out for us. The first is that we are salt in this world preventing spiritual decay. Second, we are light in this world promoting spiritual life.

We begin with the focus on the defensive strategy in that we are salt in this world preventing spiritual decay. Jesus says, in Verse 13,

¹³“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”

Before we consider this metaphor of salt and unpack its meaning and significance, we must first observe a key idea presented in these four verses. That idea is this: the Christian and the non-Christian are completely different from one another at the very core of their person and different in nature. God divides humanity into two parts. The first are disciples of Jesus Christ; those who have recognized the glory of Jesus and who have committed their way to Him, who have submitted themselves to obeying Him and following Him and trusting in Him and depending upon Him for everything, not the least of which is the forgiveness of one’s sins. The second part of God’s division is those who are not following Jesus, who are not committed to Him, and who do not believe in Him.

It is the person of Jesus who is the hinge upon which this division that God makes of this world swings. These two groups of people are essentially different; as different as salt is from decay, as different as light is from darkness, so is the difference between the believer and the follower of Jesus and the unbeliever, the one who is not yet following Jesus. Because we are different by nature we are to be different and live different. This is the reason why one of the greatest tragedies for the believer is to live a life that is merely similar to the world and to live a life that is very much like the lives lived by unbelievers. Such a life blurs the line which God creates, the line that divides between light and darkness, between life and death. It brings confusion to those who are on the side that yet does not have light and does

⁶ Matthew 5:7

⁷ Matthew 5:8

⁸ Matthew 5:9

⁹ Matthew 5:10

not have life, so that they might miss that there is a huge chasm between these two and there is an immense difference.

In 1 John 2, believers are called to listen to God's exhortation when God says,

¹⁵Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Friends, do not be a part of that group who would blur the line and claim to follow Jesus and yet be unwilling to live differently in this present world.

Right away, in Verse 13, our responsibility to be different stands out. Jesus begins His exhortation to His Disciples, after listing these eight descriptions of the life of a disciple, He says, "YOU...", because as Matthew writes it, it is emphatic. God wants us to know that He is speaking to each one of us individually, "You, and you alone, are the salt. You, and you alone, are the light."

If you attend basketball games, occasionally, when the game gets really tense and one of the star players of the visiting team commits a foul, the home team crowd wants to identify the offender. The home team crowd is not content with the whistle and the official telling the scorer's table the number of who committed this grievous offense, but the crowd wants to join in and what do they begin to shout? They shout, "YOU, YOU, YOU!" They want this guy to know that he is the one who committed this foul and he is going to be held accountable. They do not want him to be mistaken as to who it is and they do not want him to forget that he committed this grievous offense.

When Jesus say, "YOU...", He is saying it with the same kind of forcefulness, not with a condemning tone, but rather with an exalting tone. He says, "I want you, you, you to understand your new identity now that you are a follower of Jesus. The very core of your being has changed in nature." If we are not being salt in this world and if we are not being light in this world then we are rejecting the very identity that God has given to us.

Today, I want you to know that Jesus is speaking very personally to you if you are a follower of Jesus, and that we must be what we are. Jesus says, "You are the salt." Why salt? In the ancient world, as is true today, salt and light are both essential to life itself. We cannot live without salt and we cannot live without light. Salt, in particular, was very important in the world in which Jesus lived for a variety of purposes. In the ancient world salt was used, as it is today, as a seasoning so that food would taste better. Certainly this is one influence that believers have in this world, to season this world. This world is rather bland spiritually. It is tasteless spiritually. It does not understand the glory of God and the joy that is found in Him unless believers come along and reveal a delightful walk. This is one of the reasons why it is so important for us, as believers, to carry about, in our life, the characteristic of Godly joy, because if the world looks at us and sees that our lives are really bland, spiritually speaking, without joy, without energy, without zeal, and without anything to exalt in, then we will fail to be salt in the sense of seasoning this world and letting them know that there is something more in the spiritual realm that could be theirs.

Salt also, in the ancient world, was used to make people thirsty. A soldier might take a little bit of salt before he would go on a long trek so that he would drink and drink and drink and become fully hydrated because he needed his body to take in as water as it possibly could. So, God says that we are salt and this is an aspect of our influence in the world, because of our lives and our relationship with God people come up against us and they begin to realize that there is a thirst and there is something more that they are missing that someone has that they don't and they desire it and they become thirsty for spiritual things and more open to spiritual conversation.

It is the third purpose that I believe is Jesus' main emphasis. Primarily, and most significantly, salt was used in the ancient world to prevent the decaying of food and to preserve meat from becoming rotten. There was no refrigeration so meat would spoil quickly. Salt was rubbed into meat and pressed into it so that the meat would not decay as quickly, or at all. They would be able to take this meat on long journeys and the meat would be able to provide nutrition for them. It was salt being used in a preserving way and for a preserving effect.

When Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth He is telling us something about this earth and this world. He is telling us, first of all, this earth is like meat in that it decays very quickly and becomes rotten. The testimony of Scripture, from the beginning to end, is that this world is spiritually corrupt; that there is nothing in it of true spiritual nutrition because it has rotted from the inside out. God says He is taking us and placing us in this world and rubbing us into this world so that our lives will get in contact with this world and through the salt that is being rubbed into the meat there is a spiritual preserving effect.

In order for salt to have any preserving influence on meat it has to be shaken out of the salt shaker and rubbed into the meat. That is an encouragement to us as well. It is not enough for us to remain cloistered in a religious or Christian community, but we need to remove ourselves from our Christian community and place ourselves where God would have us in this world so that we might have the effect that God intends. Such requires great courage because salt, in itself, possesses a bit of a bite and a bit of a sting. Jesus did not tell us that we are the “sugar” of the world. We would like to be the “honey” of this world, wouldn’t we? That would be a very position in a very pleasant way. If we are nice to people and smile all the time and say nice things that calm and comfort, then we will have influence. Jesus says, “No, your influence is based upon your saltiness and upon the fact that there is that which is in you that runs contrary to that which is in the world and sometimes this world feels the sting of rubbing up against the Truth as it is lived out and as it is proclaimed through our life and through our lips.

God calls us to live courageously in this world and to speak out concerning Jesus and concerning His righteousness. We need not look very far to discover evidence that American culture is spiritually decaying. We believers often shake our heads in disbelief at the spiritual decay of our culture and of our world around us. Human babies are not only killed in the womb, but they are experimented on in the name of progress and science. Homosexuality is celebrated and defended as something that is right and wonderful. A man and a woman living together before marriage no longer brings shame, but rather the opposite. Ridicule is placed upon those who decide to stay pure before the marriage covenant. The Scriptures are openly attacked in the public university as a matter of a broad education. Cheating on tests, quizzes, and papers is rampant and common place in the classroom. The language of public discourse has degenerated to the point where cursing no longer is effective for the worldly purpose of eliciting shock and surprise. It used to be that when a curse word, even in a worldly context, was stated, it was used to elicit shock. Now it doesn’t elicit shock because it is a part of the language.

The Scripture tells us that this world is fallen, it is rotten, and it is corrupted by sin. The Bible is full of examples of this. We see the days of Noah. We see the days of Sodom and Gomorrah. We see the days in which Jesus lived and all through the history of the Old Testament. We see into this church age as well empirical evidence that what the Bible says about the nature of this world is true. It is interesting that this very issue of the Bible’s teaching regarding the corrupt and rotten spiritual nature of this world is that which is one of the things that is most offensive to this world, and yet there are few truths that are more readily empirically proven than this. We need only to open up this morning’s newspaper to find proof that what the Bible says about the spiritual condition of this world is actually true. It coincides with the reality as we experience it, but, friends, as believers we must not blame the meat for spoiling.

We place a chunk of meat on the countertop and we go away for vacation for a week. Do we shake our heads at the meat, “How dare that meat spoil,” when we come back? Or, would it not be more appropriate for us to ask, “Where was the salt? Where was that which is supposed to preserve it and to keep it from spoiling?” If our culture continues to decay we should not look outward and shake our heads in disbelief and disdain, but we should shake our heads inwardly and ask, “Where is the salt? To all these who are committed to following Jesus, where is the influence in this world?”

Jesus warns us, “If salt loses its saltiness...”, which is a possibility, what makes the believer influential in this world? I tell you, we have influence in this world not because we have become popular, or because we have great talents, or because of our position, or because of our prosperity, or because of our pre-eminence in our culture. We sometimes think very much like the world in terms of how we might have influence. We think of all of these ways, but I tell you that while none of these things are wrong in and of themselves, and God can use great talents and people in positions of power and people in positions of wealth, but every believer’s influence is based upon our saltiness. If we are salty we will have influence in this world and if we are not salty we will not have influence, regardless of what else is a part of our lives. What is saltiness but Christ-likeness? It is believing and knowing as Jesus knows. It is holding the

attitudes that Jesus holds. It is living out the actions that Jesus committed Himself to in this world. It is growing in Christ-likeness.

The number one way that we can possibly have influence upon our neighborhood and upon our workplace and the key to our influence is our identification with Jesus, and this is particularly true upon every parent. Every parent begins with a strong desire to influence their children for good. How might we do that? I tell you it is not through specific methods that you are going to influence them so much as it is for your saltiness. If you lose your saltiness what good are you for your children or what good are you for your workplace or what good are you in influence for your neighborhood? We become good for nothing and we become of no value except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. It is not our own self effort, but it is our joining up with the life of Christ through faith and as a result of placing our faith in Jesus we have a transformed character and a transformed life so that we think differently, we act differently, we live differently, and we are different.

Our God-given charge is to be salty. It is there in which we find great influence, and then to get out into this world so that, as we are salty, we rub up against the people of this world and we have tremendous impact.

The second metaphor that Jesus uses is the positive one of the offensive strategy. We are light in this world promoting spiritual life, as we see in Verse 14,

¹⁴*"You are the light of the world."*

Have you ever experienced total darkness? Recently I took a trip with nine other fathers and ten sons to West Virginia on our "Father/Son Adventure" and one of the activities we engaged in was caving. We went down into a cave for an entire afternoon. We had our little lights on our helmets as we were crawling through this cave. There was a particular section where they got us sitting down on the floor of this cave and they said, "Now turn off your lights." We turned off our lights and we could, literally, not see a shadow or anything; it was complete and total darkness. They said, "One by one, we are going to go by, we don't want anyone talking, and we are going to touch you on your shoulder and you are to head in this direction on your hands and knees. You are going to crawl through a passage until we come along side you and touch you again and tell you that you have reached the end." We didn't know if this was going to take two minutes, ten minutes, an hour, two hours. It was my turn to crawl through the cave and I will tell you I did not like that it was so dark. I was tempted to turn on my light, but I knew that if I did I would ruin it for everybody else in that little tunnel as we were crawling along. Finally, I get to the end and someone taps me on my shoulder and mercifully, though it seemed like a couple of hours I am sure that it was only about a five or ten minute crawl, everybody made it. Then the leader turned on his light and instantly everybody turns and was able to look around and darkness is dispelled.

God tells us, as believers, that you and I are to have that kind of influence. This world is really dark and it cannot see God. In 2 Corinthians 4, God tells us,

⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...

What a comfort it was when the light came on. It was as though the fears that were welling up inside the darkness just vanished. Friends, the Scripture tells us that this world is 100% total darkness in regards to spiritual reality. There is no spiritual light within the world itself. This is to say that the world cannot see God, it cannot know God, it cannot follow God, it cannot understand God, and it cannot worship God because it is in darkness. But, here is what Jesus says, "You are the light of the world." This appraisal of the world is very offensive to the world because the world says, "Hey, we are enlightened," but God says, "No, what you see is a mirage, it is an image that is made up out of the confines of your own imagination. It does not reflect reality." When Light shines suddenly we see reality as it really is and not as we imagined it to be.

I imagined while I was sitting there in darkness, waiting for others to finally get into this room, what this room was like. I imagined it to be pretty small and compact and I was keeping pretty low. When the light was turned on we saw that it was a pretty large area that we were sitting in and it did not fit what my mind was thinking that it was going to be. It is only until Light comes that anyone can possibly see spiritual reality regarding God and salvation and eternity.

Jesus would say to us, in John 8,

¹² *"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."*

How can Jesus say, "I am the light of the world" and then say, "You are the light of the world"? Which is it? Jesus' light is like that of the light of the sun and our light is like that of the light of the moon. Jesus' light comes from within Himself. He is the source of light. Our light is only reflected light; that the only way we are light is because the Light of Jesus is shining upon us and bouncing off as a result of our humble submission to Him and our readiness to follow him. Isn't it a wonder to be one of those moonbeams that bounces off of His light so that others might be able to see and walk by it? That is what God calls each one of us, not just special believers, not just seminary-trained believers, pastors and elders, but to everyone one of us, "You are the light of the world," Jesus says. As such we are God's instruments and God's beings whereby Light shines in this dark world.

Jesus makes two statements about this light. He says, first, that such Light cannot be hidden, as we see in Verse 14,

¹⁴ *"A city on a hill cannot be hidden."*

You cannot close it out; just as dark as dark was in that cave the littlest light turns on and that light dispels the darkness. No darkness could be so great that it snuffed out the light of the smallest, littlest candle, and so it is with us, as believers. It is not because of our own personal brightness, but it is because God's Light always dispels the darkness in this world, and if we would faithfully follow Jesus our light cannot be hidden; that others will recognize that there is something about our lives, our words, our actions, our demeanor, and our relationships. There is something about our lives that reveals a picture of that spiritual world, a picture that they otherwise could not and would not see. So it is that God has placed us in this world.

By following Christ we shine light and we communicate truth about God to others. How is that so? There are a hundred ways. Light shines when we hold onto peace during a painful trial. It shines when we have hope in the death of a loved one. It shines when we have contentment with that which we have and we are not greedy for more. It shines when we forgive those who wrong us. It shines when we love other believers deeply. It shines when we are honest in our dealings. It shines when we believe God's Word. It shines when we faithfully and courageously proclaim God's Truth.

The second idea about light is that light not only cannot hide itself, but light helps others to see, as we see in Verse 15,

¹⁵ *"Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."*

The idea is that everyone is able to see as a result of that. During our trip to West Virginia, each of us had a helmet with a light on it and we were instructed that when we were on the path and we would see a deep hole, a step down, or an edge that the person following may go over, we were to point our light at that hole or rock and say, "Rock" or "Hole". The idea was that we were to communicate what reality is to the person behind so that they do not suffer the consequence of not seeing the reality as it exists. Without that light, without that encouragement, and without shining that light to reveal that which was formerly hidden was dangerous. That is our role in this world; to take our light and say, "Here is a sin. Here is the Savior. Here is the cross," and to reveal through our lives and through our words to the people who are following behind us spiritually reality. Light helps us to see reality as it really is, and that is what we are called to be.

We are not called to put our light underneath a bowl and we do so when we have a casual indifference in our faith. How tragic it is to be light and be sitting underneath a bowl? We do that when we carelessly conform to the standards of this world. How can we, as Jesus says in Verse 16,

¹⁶ *"... let your light shine before men..."*

How do we do that? When I was little we had "glow toys" and I think little children still have them, and with these glow toys they eventually lose their glow. When I would go to bed at night and turn out the lights, they would glow bright, but pretty soon they did not have any glow at all. What we would do is turn on the light again and we would

press the glow toy up against the light and then turn off the light. It would be brighter than ever, but gradually it would begin to dim. Do you know why? It was because the glow toy did not have light in itself. Its light was derivative. That is our light!

How do we let our light shine? We need to press our lives up constantly against the Lord Jesus so that we receive Light from Him and it is then that when we walk out into this dark world that we are able to glow with brightness to help others to see. In this way, Jesus continued, we will be able to glorify our Father who is in Heaven.

Is this world dark? I tell you it is dark in a dreadful way. And yet, the tiniest candle is able to dispel the greatest darkness.

The Christian and the non-Christian, the believer and the unbeliever, the church and the world, are two diametrically opposed groups of people. They are different. Let me ask you, are you different from this world? Have you made that commitment to follow Jesus, to believe in Him, and to trust in Him as your Savior and as your Lord? It is only through Jesus that we can enter into this category of life and of light itself. If you have committed your way to following Jesus and to believing in Him and to trusting in Him for the salvation of your soul, God has a special call upon your life. It is a call to be an influence and to have great, tremendous, and eternal impact upon this world. You are salt and you are light! I tell you to shake the salt. Be salty and shake yourself out in relationships and connections and your life and your words into this world. Shine your light and do not hide it under a bowl anymore.

On August 5, 1910, the American short-story writer, O Henry, spoke his last words. Listen to what they were. As he died, he said, "Turn up the lights. I don't want to go home in the dark!" No one does, but if believers are not light they will go home in the dark and they will be without life and without hope, but praise God that He has a great calling upon our lives.

Let us shine for His glory and for our joy.