

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 02/05/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, February 5th

Matthew 5:13-20

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Losing saltiness?

This week's Gospel lection is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount that began with the Beatitudes covered in last week's lectionary text (5:1-12). Having begun the Sermon with a vision of life in the Kingdom, the Sermon continues by addressing responsibilities of discipleship. The text reveals that as disciples, we are (we = plural, the church; are = present tense, right now!) the salt of the earth and the light of the world. What did this mean to the original audience and what applications does this have for disciples (and the church) today?

Matthew 5:13-20 Commentary

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.*

Whereas today salt has a bad rap due to too much of it increases the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke, salt in the ancient world was an extremely valuable commodity. The Latin word for salt is *sal*. The English word for salary derives from the Latin word *salarium* - the money Roman soldiers were given to purchase salt. This gives rise to the expression *being worth one's salt*. According to William Barclay, at the time of Jesus, a reference to salt would have been understood in three ways: a reference to its purity, its use as a preservative and its use as a seasoning. The purity of salt was associated with its "whiteness" as well as its origin from the Sun and the sea. Salt was used in Jewish sacrifices. As a preservative, salt prevents foods from spoiling, or in other words, holds putrefaction and corruption at bay. As a seasoning, salt brings flavor to otherwise bland foods.¹

Jesus describes his disciples as *"you are the salt of the earth."* The present tense is used. Being the salt of the earth is thus something that happens in the present and not some future state. Jesus thus describes His disciples as being an example of purity in the world, of standing firm against the spoiling and corruption of society - a kind of cultural antiseptic, and an example of a joyful life through the radiance and vitality of Christ.

If salt loses its saltiness, then it loses all connection with purity, preservation and seasoning. Without its saltiness, salt is no different than sand - something that is now thrown out of the house and trampled underfoot. The Greek word *morante* (from *moraino*) is used. There are two meanings here which the original audience of this Gospel

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: The New Daily Study Bible*, rev. ed., vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 118-122.

would have no doubt been familiar with. It can mean *lose its taste* or *become foolish*. Those disciples who fail to be the salt of the earth are thus foolish. It is foolish to ignore or poorly interpret Scripture to suit one's own ends.

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.

The Jewish audience of Matthew would recognize the connection here to Israel and Jerusalem. Jesus was invoking the image of Jerusalem as the shining city on the hill as a light to the Gentiles. This is a connection to Isaiah 49:6b: "*I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.*" Jesus describes Himself as *the light of the world* in John 9:5b. Again, in the present tense, Jesus describes His disciples as reflecting the light of the Kingdom to the world through the good works done to the glory of the Father. This role of Christ's disciples is the same in the present day: Good works to glorify God rather than a personal piety.

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes 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.

Of particular importance to the Jewish audience of this Gospel is the understanding that Christ has not come to abolish what we refer to as the Old Testament but has come to fulfill it. The Sermon on the Mount is essentially a contrast between the correct and false interpretation and application of the Old Testament. Later in this sermon (and in future lectionary texts) Jesus introduces six antitheses (5:21-48) that explore such in more detail.

Reflections

Christ describes His disciples in the present tense as being the salt of the earth and light of the world. Today, Christ's disciples are expected to play the same role. The present tense means that we play this role even though we are far from perfect with a long way to go in our sanctification process. We are not being groomed for some future role of being a light bearer but are expected to reflect such light today. This light is not our own light but the light of Christ that dwells within us through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The role of the church today is to reflect the light of Christ to the world yet the inherited church throughout the West is "on the downgrade." Many note how we are living in post-Christendom. Today it is often difficult to differentiate much of the church from the world. Did the collapse of the church result from the fact that being the salt of the earth and light of the world was just too much for the world? Or did the church begin to collapse when it *stopped* being the salt of the earth and the light of the world? When the church loses its saltiness *it is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.*

Application

- To what extent does your community demonstrate salt and light to the world?
- What are your good works that glorify God?
- What does Jesus not abolishing but rather fulfilling the Hebrew Scriptures mean to you?