

The Parables of Salt and Light  
Matthew 5:13-16

Introduction

Kimberly's concern that no one would be salt and light to her LGBTQ co-workers and fellow students when she left for the Ark

1. In Matthew 5, Jesus uses these two-word pictures of salt and light to illustrate our role as believers living in this world
2. Depending on one's definition of what constitutes a parable, not everyone agrees on whether these illustrations of salt and light by Jesus qualify as parables:
  - a. Some have such a narrow definition of parable that it only includes stories with characters and a plot
  - b. Others have such a broad definition that it includes almost anything resembling a figure of speech
  - c. If you remember from our first week, for our purposes I defined a parable as a figure of speech or story specifically designed to illuminate a spiritual truth through the use of comparison
  - d. Based on this definition, Jesus' use of salt and light in our passage today certainly qualify them as parables
3. Outline:
  - a. The context surrounding the parables
  - b. The teaching of Jesus
  - c. The parables used to illustrate and illuminate the teaching
  - d. The takeaway

A. The Context

1. The context surrounding these two parables is the Sermon on the Mount, and more specifically they follow immediately upon the heels of the Beatitudes:
  - a. This places them very early in Jesus' public ministry, and in fact they are the first parables recorded in the Gospels
  - b. If you remember from our introduction, the parables Jesus used early in His ministry were relatively simple so they could be easily understood without much explanation and that is what we see here (the two parables take up only four verses)
2. I think it's a bit unfortunate that the Sermon on the Mount is called a sermon because we often imagine Jesus standing high up on the side of a mountain preaching to the masses:
  - a. However, it was actually a discourse primarily with His disciples, especially those He just appointed Apostles; the crowd was present, but they were secondary:
  - b. We see this in both Matthew's and Luke's accounts:
    - a) Matthew 5:1-2 (READ): Matthew wrote that Jesus was sitting, surrounded by His disciples, when He began to teach them

- b) Luke 6:12-20 (READ): Luke also indicates Jesus' focus was on His disciples by referring to Him setting His gaze upon them as He started to teach
- c. In his commentary on Matthew, R.T. France renames these chapters "The Discourse on Discipleship" because the purpose of Jesus' discussion with His disciples was to instruct them on what would be expected of them as His disciples:
  - a) France said it this way:
 

"The focus of these chapters is not...the wider proclamation of the 'good news of the kingdom', but the instruction of those who have already responded to that proclamation and now need to learn what life in the 'kingdom of heaven' is really about. The teaching will frequently describe them as a special group who stand over against, and indeed are persecuted by, people in general. They are those who have entered into a new relationship with 'your father in heaven,' and who in consequence are called to a radically new lifestyle, in conscious distinction from the norms of the rest of society."
  - b) The standards Jesus set for His disciples here was nothing short of perfection, in essence being like God Himself
  - c) However, He didn't intend for them to serve as a set of strict religious rites, rules or regulations, but rather a guide to life for those who embraced Him as God and Savior
  - d) In fact, the standards Jesus laid out here are impossible to maintain by those who don't embrace and submit to Him
  - e) But, for those who do and become His disciples, they serve to transform their lives

<b>B. The Teaching (Matthew 5:3-12)</b>
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1. So, what did Jesus expect of His disciples?
2. He began with what is referred to as the Beatitudes:
  - a. These are called beatitudes (Latin) because each one of the pronouncements Jesus makes begins with the Greek word for blessed (makarios)
  - b. Some claim that blessed in these verses should be understood as happy since that is one possible meaning of makarios, and while blessedness may include happiness, Biblical blessedness most generally reflects a state of spiritual well-being, prosperity, and contentment
  - c. In essence, the Beatitudes describe the character traits and behavior of true disciples of Jesus and their present and future rewards
3. There are a total of eight beatitudes (READ 5:3-12):
  - a. We don't have enough time to examine each beatitude but if you download my notes I have some interpretive details to help explain each one
  - b. However, I want to note a few things:
    - 1) First, each beatitude describes a **GODLY** quality, trait or action, followed by a resulting blessing from God
    - 2) Second, these are not random musings or blessings Jesus threw out, but what He **EXPECTS** of us as His disciples; He expects us to be Godly, like Him
    - 3) Third, these are not intended to serve as a check list of religious disciplines, rights or rules but rather identify the qualities, traits and actions that should be reflected in those who abide in Christ

- 4) Finally, they stand in stark contrast to sinful human nature, which means that as we reflect these qualities and traits as disciples of Christ we will stand out and in contrast to the world around us

### C. The Parables

1. Immediately following the beatitudes Jesus introduces two parables, one relating to salt and the other light
2. Jesus used parables to illuminate or illustrate his teaching, and in this case these two parables illuminate why it is so important for His disciples to reflect the qualities and traits He expects:
  - a. The first is the Parable of Salt (READ 5:13):
    - 1) The use of salt in the ANE:
      - a) It was used as a commodity when trading for goods
      - b) Salt was also used in medicine to prevent decay, clean wounds, and reduce swelling
      - c) It was used in religious ceremonies to purify objects and people, and in legal transactions like covenants and contracts
      - d) Salt was also widely used as a fertilizer in the ANE
      - e) The two most common uses for salt by the average person were to flavor food and to preserve food
    - 2) It is often suggested that Jesus had one or both of the latter two uses in mind when He told the disciples, **"You are the salt of the earth"** (salt as a flavoring or preservative), but it's more probable Jesus was using salt as a reference to fertilizer:
      - a) First off, He specifically referred to us as being the salt of the **"earth"** which is generally a reference to the earth, land or soil; if Jesus intended salt to be understood here as a flavoring or preservative, we might have expected him to reference food, not the earth
      - b) Second, Jesus uses this same illustration with His disciples in Luke 14:33-35 where the idea of fertilizer is much more obvious (READ): **"...it is useless for the soil or for the manure pile"**
      - c) Objections to this usually revolve around Jesus' claim of the salt becoming **"tasteless"** which would seem to suggest He was referring to salt as a flavoring:
        - This word more literally means to become void of meaning or to become non-sense and it is translated elsewhere as foolishness and only as "tasteless" when used of salt (in Matthew 5 and Luke 14)
        - What Jesus is referring to is salt losing its saltiness and this is revealed more accurately in the NIV translation: **"But if the salt loses it's saltiness, how can it be made salty again?"**
        - This is supported by Mark 9:50 where Jesus uses the same analogy but specifically uses the word for unsalty: **"...but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again?"**
      - d) So, the context, and Jesus' use of this same parable elsewhere, indicates He was likening us to fertilizer that would stimulate the growth of God's kingdom:
        - This makes sense in light of God's kingdom and people being likened throughout the New Testament to crops that grow
        - The gathering of people into God's kingdom is even referred to multiple times as harvesting

- 3) The problem with salt in the ANE is that it was often impure and mixed with other chemicals so the sodium chloride could get leached out leaving the substance with very little if any salt left in it; it would utterly be useless as a fertilizer and **“was no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and tramples under foot by men”** (13c)
  - 4) In the same way, if we became like unsalty salt, we are no longer good for anything in regard to God’s kingdom; we would be worthless
- b. The second parable is the Parable of Light (READ 5:14-16):
- 1) In John 12:36 Jesus said, **“While you have the Light (a reference to Himself), believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light”** and we see that reflected here (pardon the pun)
  - 2) Jesus begins with the declaration that we are **“the light of the world”** (14b) and gives two examples that reveal the nature and purpose of light:
    - a) A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, in part because even at night the lights of the city would make it visible (seeing Columbus and Marion at night from Delaware)
    - b) When someone lights a lamp, they put it on a lampstand, not under a basket, so that **“it gives light to all who are in the house”** (15)
  - 3) Jesus is no longer here in person, so we serve in His place as light to the world (16):
    - a) The light we have is Christ and the truth of the Gospel, and it is shown through our **“good works”** which is a reference to not only our obedience to the beatitudes Jesus just laid out in vs. 2-12 but to all He commanded
    - b) The goal or purpose is letting our light shine before all men is so that they might glorify our Father who is in heaven (16)
      - This is a reference to salvation and we see this in Paul’s statement in Acts 13:47 (ESV): **“For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”**
      - Paul alluded to the same thing in Philippians 2:14-15: **“Do all things without grumbling or disputing; 15 so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world...”**

D. The takeaway
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1. I’ve only got one takeaway and it’s this: as Jesus’ disciples we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world:
  - a. We are the fertilizer that He uses to cause His kingdom to grow, and the light that He uses to reveal the Light of Christ and the Truth of the Gospel to the world
  - b. However, we can’t just identify as salt and light; we actually have to be salt and function as light
  - c. This means we have to take being Jesus’ disciples seriously and recognize the exceptionally high bar He set for us in the beatitudes and everything else He taught
  - d. In fact, He not only told His disciples that our righteousness has to exceed that of the pharisees, and just a few verses later said, **“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”** (Matthew 5:48)

- e. **THIS** is the context in which Jesus called us the salt of the earth and the light to the world; we are not merely seasoning or preservatives, but the fertilizer God uses to grow His kingdom and it requires that we take our role as disciples seriously
- 2. The question each of us should be asking ourselves is whether or not I am truly serving as salt and light by God to grow His kingdom?
- 3. If not, the second question we should probably ask ourselves is, “Do we take our role as disciples seriously?”

## Interpretive Notes on the Beatitudes

1. First (3):
  - a. Quality: **"Blessed are the poor in spirit"**: to be poor in spirit means to be humble, lowly, or contrite before God and is associated with fearing the Lord and obeying His word (Isaiah 57:15; 66:2)
  - b. Blessing: **"for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"**: another way to say this is their kingdom is God's kingdom; they have come to embrace it and therefore enjoy the benefits and rewards associated with being God's people
2. Second (4):
  - a. Quality: **"Blesses are those who mourn"**: Based on how mourning is used in some passages in the Old Testament, Jesus likely has in mind not simply those who mourn for a period, but those with seemingly endless suffering and difficulty in life
  - b. Blessing: **"for they shall be comforted"**: this is the word parakaleo which means to come alongside, to comfort, encourage, help
3. Third (5):
  - a. Quality: **"Blessed are the gentle"**: this word is rendered as "lowly" and "meek" by other translations and is similar to "poor in spirit" but relates to one's relationship with others; it can describe those who are weak and powerless, but also to those who are not proud and oppressive, or throw their weight around; the Bible describes such people as those who wait on the LORD to right the wrongs done against them
  - b. Blessing: **"for they shall inherit the earth"**: this describes a reversal of fortune of sorts; it's not the rich and powerful or those who oppress who inherit the earth, but those who are meek after God cuts off those who have oppressed and mistreated them
4. Forth (6):
  - a. Quality: **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness"**: Matthew repeatedly uses this word for righteousness to refer to right conduct or living according to God's standards; so here it refers to those who eagerly seek to live as God requires
  - b. Blessing: **"for they shall be satisfied"**: this word means to be fully satisfied and was used to refer to the feeding and fattening of animals; it brings to mind what Jesus said to Satan when he tempted him to turn the stones into bread: **"But He answered and said, 'It is written, 'man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God'"** (Matthew 4:4)
5. Fifth (7):
  - a. Quality: **"Blessed are the merciful"**: to be merciful means to be compassionate and extend grace and forgiveness when wronged rather than seeking retribution or revenge;
  - b. Blessing: **"for they shall receive mercy"**: both the OT and the NT call on God's people to be merciful because He is merciful, and later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, **"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But, if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions"** (Matthew 6:14-15)
6. Sixth (8):

- a. Quality: **“Blessed are the pure in heart”**: one of the things God desires of us is that we be clean not just on the outside (e.g. our behavior), but that we be clean on the inside which is what is described here; it’s an inner purity or cleanness, void of hypocrisy, deceit, impure motives
  - b. Blessing: **“for they shall see God”**: Jesus may have had Psalm 24 in mind when He said this (READ Psalm 24:1-6)
7. Seventh (9):
- a. Quality: **“Blessed are the peacemakers”**: notice that Jesus didn’t say “blessed are the peaceful” here but “peacemakers” which refers to those who actively seek to make peace with others
  - b. Blessing: **“for they shall be called sons of God”**: the ANE idiom “sons of [something]” was a way showing how one thing shares the characteristics of the other, for instance when Jesus used the phrase “sons of light” to refer to the righteous but “sons of this age” to refer to the wicked; in this case, peacemakers are blessed because they share the character of the ultimate Peacemaker God and will therefore be called His children
8. Eighth (10-12):
- a. Quality: **“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness...Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me”** (10a, 11):
  - b. Blessing: **“for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”** (10b, 12)