

Starting today and for the next two weeks, I want to focus on the Sermon on the Mount as contained in Chapters 5 and 6 of the Gospel of Matthew. Let's start our discussion with Jesus' call for us to be the salt and light to the world as recorded in verses 13 through 16 of the fifth chapter of Matthew. You can follow along on Page 10 in the New Testament in the Pew Bibles.

Read Matthew 5:13-16

A young Christian man went to work in a lumber camp one summer. Some of his friends told him that the rough lumberjacks would make his life miserable once they found out he was a Christian. When he got back home, his friends asked him if the men had laughed at him for being a Christian. To which he replied: "No, they didn't laugh at me at all for being a Christian. They never found out!"

As we have discussed before, that's not the way Jesus wants us to live or the witness He expects from us. In this passage, Jesus said that we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Note that He does not say: "You can be salt or you can be light when you choose or when it is convenience for you, like on Sunday morning." Rather, He says: "You are the salt; you are the light." He does not give us an option; He clearly states what He expects from His followers. I have used this illustration before, but it is worth repeating: if you and I were put on trial this morning for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict us? How would our friends and neighbors testify? Would they say that they knew that we were Christians by the way we act or would they say that they were surprised since we act just like everybody else?

In this scene, Jesus is speaking to His disciples; He is not talking just to the intellectual, philosophical or even religious people. He is talking to everyday people just like you and me; challenging us to follow His example. As was His habit, Jesus often used things from everyday life as teaching illustrations. In the ancient world salt was a highly valued commodity that was scarce and desperately needed. Salt was so valuable that the Romans sometimes paid their soldiers with it. If a soldier did not carry out his duties, others would say: "He is not worth his salt!" Even today we often compliment people by saying they are the "salt of the earth."

People at the time of this text associated salt with three qualities. The first was purity. No doubt its glistening whiteness made the connection easy. The Romans said that salt was the purest of all things, because it came from the purest of all things, the sun and the sea. So then, if we as Christians are to be the salt of the earth, we must be an example of purity; creating pure and wholesome conditions wherever we go. In one of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:8, Jesus said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Unfortunately, this is extremely difficult in today's world where moral standards continue to decline at an alarming rate. The days when a person's word and a handshake were all that was needed to seal a contract are long gone. Men and women of honor are as rare today as are those who are willing to put in an honest day's work. As Christians we are called to be different, to be pure in speech, conduct and even in thought. And while we are called to represent Christ in the world, we must be careful to not become polluted by the world and its low moral standards.

In the ancient world salt was the most common of all preservatives; it was put on meat to prevent it from spoiling. Salt prevents corruption and decay. If the Christian is to be the salt of the earth, he must have a certain antiseptic (cleansing) influence on life. We all know that there are certain people in whose company it is easy to be good; and then there are those people in whose company it is easy to lower our standards and get into trouble. The Christian is to be the person whose presence defeats corruption and makes it easier for others to be good.

The greatest and most obvious quality of salt is that it adds flavor, seasoning to things. We all know how bland and tasteless some food can be without a little salt. Christianity is to life what salt is to food; thus, Christians should add flavor to life. Salt is not the food; it benefits the food by its presence. In the same way, our presence in the world is for its benefit, regardless of the way the world treats us.

The tragedy is that so often people have associated Christianity with precisely the opposite. They believe that being a Christian is no fun; it's dull and tasteless. Unfortunately, we as Christians have contributed to this false impression. As I have said before many Christians walk around looking as if they have been baptized with vinegar. If you have found the joy that only Jesus can bring into your life, then let your face know it. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said: "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers."

We are to live the Christian life in a way that other people will see that life without Jesus is stale and meaningless, and that life with Jesus is full of spiritual flavor, joy and abundance. In a worried world, the Christian should be the only person who remains content. In a depressed world, the Christian should be the person who exhibits joy. Can you imagine how much joy Jesus brought to the lives of the people He came into contact with; how He added flavor to their lives? We are called to do the same.

A young salesman was disappointed about losing a big sale; as he talked with his boss, he said: "I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." To which the boss replied: "Son, your job is not to make him drink; your job is to make him thirsty!" Are

we making anyone thirsty to know about Jesus Christ? Is there anyone who is curious about Jesus because of the way we live and act? Our lifestyle should exude such a flavor that it creates a hunger and thirst in others for the Lord.

Right after Jesus tells the disciples that they are the salt of the earth He warns them that they are in danger of losing this precious gift if they don't use it. Of course salt does not lose its flavor, so to understand what Jesus meant we need to understand how salt was used back then. The ordinary oven was outside and was made of stone on a base of tiles. To maintain the heat a thick layer of salt was placed under the tiles. After a certain length of time the salt perished. The tiles were taken up, the salt removed and thrown onto the road. It had lost its power to heat the tiles, its usefulness, and was thus thrown out.

Here Jesus is stating a fact that is repeated throughout the New Testament; once we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are expected to grow each and every day to become more like Him in how we live our daily lives. The theological word for this is sanctification, which basically means striving to become more like Jesus Christ. This is what we discussed two weeks ago on the 3C's of Christianity, and what we will be studying in our Wednesday night *Believe* class. It involves walking with the Lord each and every day; having a daily quiet time of prayer and Bible reading; regularly attending worship and Bible study; and serving. Christianity is not a one-time event, but a life long journey. While God's grace is freely given, we are expected to do our part.

In the parable of the sower in the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Luke that we discussed a few weeks ago, Jesus used a farmer sowing seeds to make a similar point. Some seed fell on the beaten path and were eaten by the birds; some fell on the rocky soil and the roots did not go deep enough to withstand the heat of the day; some fell among the thorns and were choked out by the demands and worries of life; and then some fell on good soil and produced an abundant crop. If our hearts are not right and if we don't make the effort, then the Word of God will not take root in our lives and we will lose out on the blessings and joy that only God can give to us.

After stating that we are to be the salt of the earth, Jesus now calls for us to be the light of the world. This may be one of the greatest compliments ever paid to Christians, for in this statement, Jesus commands the Christian to be what He Himself claims to be. In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus said: "I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." When Jesus commanded His followers to be the lights of the world, He demanded nothing less than that they should be like Him.

I like the way that *Message* paraphrases verses 14-16: “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.”

When Jesus spoke these words, He was using an expression that was very familiar to His audience. The houses back then were very dark with only one little circular window. The lamp was no more than a gravy boat filled with oil with a wick floating in it. Normally the lamp stood on a lampstand which would be no more than a roughly shaped wooden table. For safety sake, the lamp was removed from its stand and put under an earthen bushel, so that it might burn without risk when the family was away from home. The primary duty of the light of the lamp was to be seen. Thus, Christianity is something that is meant to be seen, not just here at church, but in our everyday life.

The point is that those we come in contact with each day should see Jesus in us; see His qualities of love, grace, joy, hope, mercy and forgiveness in us. In this passage Jesus is not asking us to produce our own light. Jesus is the true Light of the World; we in turn are called to reflect His light to the world. We must be careful to not call attention to ourselves or to seek to be in the spotlight. This defeats the purpose that Jesus has for us. Christians should never think of what they have done, but what God has done through them. We should never draw attention to ourselves, but always direct others to God. If Jesus dwells in our hearts we will radiate His love to the world and shine for Him.

As children of the light, we are to separate ourselves from the darkness of this world. The light of Jesus dispels this darkness. One evening when Robert Louis Stevenson was a child, he stood at the window watching an old lamplighter at work. The lamplighter made his way down the street lighting one street lamp after another. This process fascinated young Stevenson. Thinking that his quietness meant that he was up to no good, the nanny called out to him: “Robert, what are you doing?” To which he answered: “I’m watching a man making holes in the darkness!” That’s exactly what Jesus Christ did on the first Christmas and what He is still doing in the lives of those who accept Him as their Lord and Savior. Jesus Christ is the transforming light who touches each heart, piercing its darkness, and making His glory shine within it.

Since Jesus came into this dark world His light has not stopped shining, and darkness has not been able to overcome it. Even though Jesus has returned to heaven, His light should shine in the hearts and lives of His followers. As the moon reflects the light of the sun, so are we to reflect the light of Jesus Christ to all those around us through our words and actions. Have you

ever thought of yourself as a light – a candle, flashlight or headlight? Well, that's what Jesus expects of each of us. We are to shine the light of Jesus into the darkness of the lives of those around us.

A preacher told of eating in a restaurant and seeing the manager eating lunch at a fast-food establishment across the street. What message did the manager's choice of food send to those watching him? I think it said: "Don't eat here; the food across the street is better." People are watching us. They see how we live. They hear what we say. They see our priorities in the things we buy and focus on. They observe the places we go. And they know the company we keep. We are "walking billboards, living Bibles." Does our advertisement say "follow me to Christ," or does it lead people across the street? Jesus said: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

The next time you put salt on your food or turn on a light, remember what Jesus expects from you! Add flavor to the lives of those around you and let your light shine brightly for the Lord!
Amen