

Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-16

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Well, good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny and I'm the senior pastor here and it is great to be with you. If you are a guest or visitor, welcome. We're glad that you're here. I'm glad that we can join together as we come to worship our God because what we are all in need of and the reason why we come here each and every Sunday is the grace of the Lord. That's what every one of us is in need of and as we go out from this place into our world, as we go to our places of work, our neighborhoods, our schools, even our homes, we are constantly bombarded with different ideas about what it means to be people, what it means to be human, how it is that we are to live in this world. We have things that are vying for our desires and affections and our thoughts and so that's why we need to return each and every week to be reminded of what is the truth of God's Word and what does it mean to be his people as we live in this world and so that's why we come to his Word and that's what we're going to see from his Word as we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount.

So, if you are new with us this week, we started a new sermon series last week looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and if you are with us, you remember I said that the Sermon on the Mount is about that very thing. How is it that God's people are to live in the world? That the Sermon on the Mount is a sermon given to his disciples about what it looks like to be his disciples, to be kingdom people surrounded by other kingdoms. How do we live in this world? That is the question that is presented from the Sermon on the Mount and that is the question that Jesus is answering and so I'd invite you, if you have a Bible, you can turn to Matthew 5. We're going to pick up where we left off last week. The first 12 verses of chapter 5 are the Beatitudes but now Jesus is starting to flesh out what it looks like for us to be his kingdom people in the world and this is what he says beginning in verse 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. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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.”
(ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord.

Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would give us wisdom now, that you would open our eyes and that you would soften our hearts so that, Father, we would behold your glory and we would know what it means to live as your people. And so we ask, Father, that by your Spirit you would lead us, you would guide us, you would direct us, not just as we leave this place but right now as we come to your word and we pray all this in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, a couple of years ago if you were listening to popular music or you were watching popular movies then you probably heard a song that was featured in the Barbie movie, a song by Billie Eilish, in which she asked this question. She asked, “what was I made for?” In this

song she sings, “taking a drive, I wasn't ideal, look so alive, turns out I'm not real, just something you paid for, what was I made for? When did it end, all the enjoyment, I'm sad again, don't tell my boyfriend, it's not what he's made for, what was I made for?” Now, you can hear from the words that Billie Eilish is singing that this song is primarily about identity, it's about purpose, it's about meaning, it's about what her place in this world is, what am I made for? And it would be very easy for maybe some of us to write off this song and not really think much about it because after all it's featured in a movie about a plastic doll, right? We know that the Barbie movie is much more than that but it'd be easy for us to think that this isn't something I need to think about because it's about this plastic doll that isn't even real and so we write it off, what was I made for? But actually we shouldn't write this question off because this is a question that isn't just prominent in the songs of Billie Eilish or in a movie like the Barbie movie, this question is throughout music and entertainment and culture in general. We hear this question of identity, of purpose, of meaning being asked from songs like Taylor Swift's “Mirrorball” all the way to Radiohead's “Fake Plastic Trees” and we see it in movies like *Toy Story* and *Moana* and *The Truman Show* and even *The Godfather*, that we see these questions, these considerations of purpose, of meaning, of identity being asked all around us. And these themes, these questions, they're so common in our entertainment, sorry, these questions, they're so common in our entertainment because really they're common in our experience because the truth is is that it's not just musicians and it's not just movie makers and it's not just storytellers or authors of literature that are wrestling with this question, we are wrestling with this question.

For the Sake of the World

We are wondering it, “what is my purpose? What am I made for? Who am I?” These are the questions that we are asking about ourselves and this is the question that Jesus is actually answering in our section of the Sermon on the Mount. We hear him dealing with this, who we are and what we're to do. We hear him saying this in verses 13 and 14, right? He says, “you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” You are this. Notice what he didn't say. He didn't say you're becoming salt. He didn't say if you try really hard and you work for a long enough time, then you will become light. No, he doesn't say those things. He says you are salt and light. This is who you are. But what does that mean? If this is who we are, if this is part of our identity, if this is part of our purpose, what does that mean? If we've been around the church for any length of time, you've heard this phrase used, right? You're salt and light. We just kind of say it casually. Let us be salt and light in this world. But what does that really mean? What I want us to see is that what that means and in answering what this is, we're going to answer what it is by saying what it means, our purpose, and what we're going to see is that what it means is that we are salt and light for the sake of the world. That we are to be salt and light for the sake of the world. That's what God's people are.

I say that because he says, right, not just that you are salt and light, but he says you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. And as soon as Jesus puts those words together, salt of the earth, light of the world, he is indicating something about the world. He's speaking to the state of the world and our placement in the world to address that state. So what's he saying about the world? Well, he's saying two things. He's saying the world is decaying and the world is in darkness. And I say decaying in darkness because of the metaphor of salt and light. Now, I know for most of us, when we think about salt, we simply think about it as being something that adds flavor to our food, right? And it's very common for us. I've been sure to say that probably all of us have salt readily at our disposal in our kitchens, right? And we throw it into food all the time.

Just this morning when I was making my eggs, one of the first things I did was I put salt in it, right? Because bland food, it's bland. And we want salt. And that's how we think about salt. Salt is simply for adding flavor. And of course, in the ancient Near East, in Jesus's time, salt would have been used in this way. But it wasn't primarily used this way. Because salt wasn't as readily available to just the average Israelite. Salt was something that came from the ground, this rock salt. And so when they were hearing the language of salt, they probably didn't go first in their minds to flavor. They went first in their minds probably to preservation. Because that's how salt was often used. They didn't have refrigeration, right? They couldn't stick a cut of beef into the freezer and save it for three or four or six months and then pull it out, right? They had to preserve it in another way, and they preserved it with salt.

So they took their cut of meat and they doused it with salt. They covered it with salt. And in doing this, it was preserving it against rot and decay. As Martin Lloyd-Jones put it, it prevented putrefaction. Pastors and theologians get to just make up words, you know. And so that's what he's doing. Putrefaction. That's what it was preventing. And so when Jesus says that his people are the salt of the earth, he is comparing his disciples to a preserving agent. That by their and our lives, we are to be restrainers of moral decay. And in doing this, bring purity. Bring purification. Because that's what salt was doing. It kept the meat pure. And so Jesus is saying that's who we are. And this is needed in the world because in our world, under the weight of sin, feeling the effects of the fall, our world is decaying. Sin has taken God's good creation and it's making it rot. And so we are the salt of the earth.

But we're not just the salt of the earth in a world that's decaying. We're also the light of the world because the world is in dark. In the dark. Because we don't need light in a room full of lamps. Right? If you pulled out your phones and turned on your flashlight right now in this room, it's not needed. We have light. So the implication that there is need of light means that there is darkness. There is darkness. That's the deduction we are to make. And that's actually implied in John chapter one when we're told that Jesus is the light of men. And then we're told that the light shines in the darkness. That there is a spiritual darkness in this world. And so God puts us into this world to be light in the dark. And to resist the decaying of sin. So do you know what this means at its most basic? It means that we as salt and light have to be in the world. That should go without saying. But it is far too easy for us to want to remove ourselves from the world. To want to retreat away from it. To create our own little Christian bubbles. To create our communities of holy people detached from the world. But if we are to be salt resisting decay.

We are to be light in the midst of darkness. It means we have to be in the place where decay is happening. And it means we have to be in the place where there is darkness. It should go without saying. But the reality is, is I know that there are Christian communities even today. And we might think about like monastic communities in the past. But even today there are those Christian leaders who are calling for Christians to come and be part of a little town, a little city. And let us form our little enclave away from the world. And y'all that is not what Jesus is calling us to. We're to be in the world. And Jesus makes it explicit in verses 14 through 15. He says, "you are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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." Do you hear what he's saying? He's saying a city on a hill. That's who the church is. We are a city on a hill. And a city on the hill can't be hidden. It's going to be seen. And we are the light of the world. And the light you don't put under a basket but you bring it out and you shine it into the dark corners for the sake of the darkness. To push against the darkness for the sake of the world.

This is actually what Isaiah was talking about in Isaiah chapter 60. There's this beautiful passage. Go back later today and read Isaiah 60. It really is this amazing picture of what's going to happen when the Messiah comes. When Jesus comes. Isaiah writes, darkness shall cover the earth. But the Lord will arise upon you. And his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light. The darkness will not overcome it. The light will send it scattering. The nations will be drawn to the light. We don't remove ourselves from the world. No, we enter into the world as salt. And we enter in as light for the sake of the world. Okay, so how do we do this then? How are we to function as salt and light for the sake of the world? Well, we do this through our good works. That's what Jesus says in verse 16. In the same way, the same way a city can't be hidden. The same way light isn't put under a basket. He says, in the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works.

Through Good Works

Okay, so these aren't works so that we would become light or so that we would start being salty. No, these are works that demonstrate that we already are. Okay, that we've already been made salt and light. These works show that we are. And so we are supposed to do good works in this world. Now, imagine when some of you hear this call for good works for the sake of the world. Maybe you start thinking about like church history and the great heroes of the faith. And you start thinking about Christians who have influenced good for the world. And so maybe you start thinking about like people like Bonhoeffer who resisted the Nazis. Or William Wilberforce who worked to end the slave trade in the British Empire. Or George Mueller who started orphanages and through these orphanages cared for 10,000 children, orphans. Or maybe you think about Polycarp. Or you think about Corrie ten Boom. Or you think about Jim Ellison. You think about these people who there are books written about. Whose lives had this incredible impact upon society. And you think those are the good works that we need to perform. That's what it means to be salt and light.

Maybe that's what you think about. And that can feel really overwhelming, right? I mean, starting an orphanage that eventually is going to care for 10,000 orphans. I mean, that is a wonderful accomplishment. That is a wonderful blessing. That is amazing that the Lord used George Mueller in that way. And wow, I don't know if I can do that. And the truth is that some of you, some of you maybe now or maybe in the future are going to be put in positions of influence that you can affect structural and societal change for the sake of the gospel. But many of us, dare I say most of us, our good works are going to be far less noticed and much more mundane and very normal and yet still very important. So, let me give you two examples of how I see this maybe playing out.

And examples of how I've seen it play out, these good works. So, I have a friend who lives in St. Louis. He works for Boeing. And he's not allowed to tell me what he does because he's under a government contract. So, his job is classified what he does on planes and I don't have clearance, right? So, he's never actually told me what he does, but he did tell me the story about this time he was called into his boss's office. His boss, it was first thing in the morning or end of day, I can't really remember, calls him into her office and sits him down and begins by saying, "what is up with you and the way you work?" Now, I have to tell you, if my boss called me into his office and this is what he or she said to me, I would think the next things out of their mouth is you are lazy, "you're not working hard enough and you're fired, right?" I mean, if that's how the conversation began, I would be fearful for my job.

But she actually went on and said, “what is up with you and the way that you work? Because you get here early and you stay late and you work hard and you help your co-workers on their projects that have nothing to do with you and you never seem to complain about it. You seem to really like your job and you do it with joy and even when you don't really like your job, you don't make us think about it. So, what is going on with you? I don't understand.” This is what his boss says to him. And so, my friend said, “well, I'm a Christian. And because I'm a Christian, that means that I need to honor the Lord in my work. And what that means is that I'm going to try to be a good employee and I'm going to use my gifts and my abilities and my skills and my intelligence and my hours and my time, I'm going to use it to be a blessing, not just for our client, but also to my co-workers and even to you.” And he shared the gospel with her. Y'all, his good works was him doing his job for the glory of God for the sake of the world. He was salt and light at Boeing. Okay, that's one example.

Let me give you one more. This is a conversation I had just a couple days ago. So, some of you know that there are a couple places in town that I like to frequent with a lot. There's a few places I go to. And I've gone to know the employees at these places. I walk in, they know me, I know them. I sit down, they bring me a water with no ice because they just know I don't like ice. I've gotten to know these people very well. And so, I'm sitting here the other day and I'm making notes for this sermon. And the time comes, I need to leave and I go to get my bill. And the waitress, the bartender comes and gives me the bill. And I look at it and something's wrong. It's not the right amount. And so, I say to her, I say, “I think you made a mistake. Is there a deal going on today? Did you accidentally give me a happy hour price?” Something like that. And she says, “yeah, I typed in, but don't worry about it. You're a regular and you're doing the Lord's work.” Before I could say anything, she then says, “I may not be religious, but I can respect it. And, you know, I used to be religious. And maybe one day I will be. But I've seen a lot of corrupt people in the church.” I didn't ask her to share any of that with me. I don't know what this corruptness that she's observed in the church is. This is a woman who's in maybe her late 20s. So, I'm not sure how much she's even seen. And yet that is what she says to me, knowing I'm a pastor. But then she went on and she said, “I've seen a lot of corrupt people in the church. But clearly you're not.”

Now, this story really isn't about anything I've done. Because the reality is, is I haven't done anything special. I go in there. I sit down. I make my order. I talk. I ask questions. I listen. When they share about their life, I ask more questions and listen some more. I try not to be a disruption, a disturbance. I simply go and I'm present. I do nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that any of y'all wouldn't do. And just by living with a little bit of kindness, and a little bit of attentiveness, those works are dispelling her notions about what Christians are like and what God is like. And y'all, the truth is, is that more and more, I think this is what our works are seeking to need to do in our world. Because the truth is, is that for far too long, the church and the people of God, to our shame, have looked too much like the world and lived in ways no different from the world. So why would anyone want to listen to us? And simply by living with integrity, before the world, we are pointers to Jesus. You see, if we live like the world, then we have stopped living as salt and light.

Jesus said in verse 13, “if the 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.” You see, when we look like the world and our words sound like the world and our neighbors see nothing different from the world, then we are no longer salty and we have hidden our lamp. And so sometimes, salt and light is simply being kind and gracious, listening and speaking words of truth with love. The theologian Dan Doriani, he put it this way, he said, “good deeds

are simply practical acts of kindness and neighborly love, a virtuous life, giving light to all around us.” You see, this woman, she has looked upon the church and she has seen corruption. And so if she is going to listen to the gospel, if she is going to be open to the truth of who Jesus is, she needs to see the church living with integrity, living out our good works for the sake of the world and for the glory of God. Because friends, that is the ultimate goal.

To the Glory of God

The ultimate goal is the glory of God. That is the goal of living as salt and light and living out our good works for the sake of others. It's not so people will say how kind we are or what good neighbors we are or what great workers we are. No, the ultimate goal is the glory of God. Jesus said in verse 16, “let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” My friend at Boeing was doing this. He worked so differently from all the other co-workers that his boss had to ask what was different. And when she asked, he pointed to God. He pointed to Christ. That is the difference. You see, as we are people who taste salty and who shine forth light, we are pointing the world to Christ. And y'all, what is amazing about this is that Jesus is the true light. And Jesus is the ultimate preserver, preservative against decay. And yet he calls us the light of the world. That is the name he took on himself.

Do you remember that in John 8? He said, “I am the light of the world.” But now he says that about us. That we are the light of the world. That we as the moon doesn't produce light on its own, but simply reflects back the light of the sun. So neither do we produce the light of life from within us, but we reflect it back to the world. Y'all, that analogy has been used since the beginning of time, right, to talk about God and light. And yet this is where the analogy breaks down because though it is true that we do not produce light within us, we do have the light of Christ that pours out from us. We are not simply reflectors of that light, but it actually dwells within us and comes out of us. That is what is incredible about being his people. That we are the light of Christ in this world, shining in the darkness, but we shine to point others to the true light. We are the salt of the earth, pushing back sin and resisting decay, giving the world a taste of the day when Jesus will return and cleanse the world from its stains and renew it to a place without sin and decay.

That is who we are. That as we live, we are pointing to the true light. And as we live, we are pointing to the one who doesn't just restrain decay, but renews this world. We are pointing to that day when Jesus will restore his world and his light will shine so bright that there will be no need of sun or lamp or star or moon, but his light will be so bright that we will see by his light. And yet until that day comes, he has put us in his world to live as salt and light for the sake of his world and for the glory of his name. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do ask that you would help us to live this way, that we would not retreat away from this world. We would not pull away from it, but instead we would live in the midst of it. We would live in the midst of it as salt and light. Restraining decay, pushing against sin, shining light into the dark and pointing others to you. So, Father, I pray that you would help us. Help us to shine our light before this world. Help us to not lose our saltiness. Help us to live for the sake of the world and for the glory of your name. And we pray all this in the name of Jesus and God's people said together. Amen.