

A World Without Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-16

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

Preaching Date: January 17, 2021

Worship: Light of the World

Key Sentence: We are here to have an impact

Outline:

I. Salty Salt

II. Lighty Light

Matthew 5:13–16 “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.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In 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.

A World Without Salt and Light

Matthew 5:1-12

It's both tremendously easy and tremendously hard to imagine a world without light.

It's easy because you can just close your eyes and get some sense of it. Or you can go into a fully darkened room at night, or to a really dark place outside on a cloudy night and you have this sense, what it's like to not be able to see your hand in front of your face. But the implications of a world without light would be larger than just loss of vision. A world without light would be without heat, colder than the furthest speck of dust at the furthest reaches of the solar system. It would be without life, for ultimately sunlight is the engine of all life. A world without light would be cold, dead and dark.

It's harder to imagine a world without salt. You probably know salt is an essential nutrient, used for the regulation of fluid levels and the transmission of nervous impulses, among other things. As a result, every agricultural society has sought salt. Mark Kuransky, in his epic *Salt: A World History* says "Salt is so common, so easy to obtain, and so inexpensive that we have forgotten that from the beginning of civilization until about 100 years ago, salt was one of the most sought-after commodities in human history." He points out that "The Roman army required salt for its soldiers and for its horses and livestock. At times soldiers were even paid in salt, which was the origin of the word salary and the expression 'worth his salt.'" As civilization and agriculture spread, salt became one of the first commodities of trade and its production was one of the first industries. Salt trade routes traversed the globe, between Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Salt was often used as money, and was desperately coveted, hoarded, searched for, traded for, and even fought over.

So in a physical sense a world without salt or light would be a disaster. The same is true in a spiritual and metaphorical sense. Light is spiritually associated with life and understanding, purity and truth. Darkness is associated with confusion, depression, ignorance and sin. Salt is associated with preservation and life and enhanced flavor. A lack of salt is associated with decay and death and dullness. But Jesus, in today's text, says that we, believers, are like salt and light in the world. We serve to dispel darkness and ignorance and to point the world to life and the knowledge of God. We serve to preserve culture, to make it life-nurturing and to enhance its flavor. When we fail to do those things we allow the culture to slip more toward darkness and decay. And in this day, 2021 AD, we know we're experiencing that. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:13-16 that as people of the beatitudes, we are to have an impact in the world. As salt and light in the world, we are to make a difference.

I've divided the text into its two main thoughts, that kingdom people are to be salty salt and lighty light. I actually considered "Salty McSaltface" and "Lighty McLightface" after the now famous "Boaty McBoatface." A few years ago the British Environmental Research Council held an online poll to name their new \$400 million dollar Arctic exploration ship. A BBC Radio personality jokingly suggested Boaty McBoatface, and that quickly went viral. But though Boaty McBoatface was the most popular suggestion, it was not followed. The Minister for Universities and Science, Jo Johnson, announced that the ship would be named after Sir David Attenborough, and the name Boaty McBoatface would be used for one of the submersibles aboard instead. But the phrasing caught on, and I use it here because we're not just to be salt, we're to be salty salt. And we're not just to be light, we're to be lighty light.

Let's read the text. **Matthew 5:13–16** *"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."*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."*

Verse 13 is the salt verse: "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." Salt was used in the ancient world to flavor foods and even in small doses as a fertilizer. Above all, salt was used as a preservative. Steeped in salt or strong salt brine, meat could be preserved for months or even years. Indeed, one of my favorite paragraphs in all my reading, as reported by Simon Winchester, tells of a photo he ran across with "the oddest of captions, its wording quite hauntingly bizarre." It was a picture of two boys holding up something that looked like it once might have been an animal. The caption read "Two Moso boys displaying a fine specimen of the Boneless Pig. After being slaughtered, boned and salted these huge pigs are used as mattresses for up to a dozen years before being eaten."

But what if the salt is useless, Jesus asks. What if it has lost its taste? Strictly speaking salt cannot lose its saltiness; sodium chloride is a stable compound, and the distinctive taste of salt persists, even if highly diluted. But most salt in the ancient world was obtained from salt marshes or mineral deposits, rather than by evaporation of pure salt water. It therefore contained many impurities. The actual sodium chloride, being more soluble than the impurities, could be leached out, leaving a saltless mineral dust.

Stott says “The residue of white powder still looked like salt, and was doubtless still called salt, but it neither tasted nor acted like salt. It was just road dust.” All it could be used for was to be put on footpaths or even rooftops to harden the soil. So too a Christian. Christian saltiness is Christian character as depicted in the beatitudes, committed Christian discipleship exemplified in both deed and word. For effectiveness the Christian must retain his Christlikeness, as salt must retain its saltness. If Christians become assimilated to non-Christian ways of acting and thinking, dominated by the impurities of the world, they lose their influence.

Tim Keller gave a superb defense of Christianity at a Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast in Britain a few years ago, and this was his key verse. He said “Jesus is using a metaphor, salt. And when salt is dispersed into meat it is both savory and preservative. On the one hand it’s savory. It brings out the taste, the best in the meat. But on the other hand it’s a preservative. It keeps it from decaying. But only if the salt is salt. That is only if it's chemically different than the meat. If it's not different chemically from the meat then it's of no use at all. The metaphor Jesus is using is that his disciples, that’s the Christians, should be dispersed in the societies of the world. We’re the salt of the earth he says. That doesn't mean the ground. He means the world, society. And in every society that means that Jesus says “my disciples should be bringing out the best in that particular culture and preventing its worst tendencies as well.” But only if Christians remain salt which is different from the rest of the culture.”

How do we do that? I’m convinced this Sermon on the Mount is our guide and our guard. We have to push back against the decay of our culture, and against the damage, hurt and de-humanization that result. We push back both culturally and politically. But we will only achieve the preservative effect we long for when we push back within the boundaries defined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Be humble and gentle. Practice mercy and peacemaking. Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Love your enemies and pray for them. Do not seek revenge or retribution, and many more. On the other side of the line are things like rage, hatred and violence; verbal, physical and social media abuse; defensiveness, arrogance, and monomania; offensiveness, threats and de-humanization. These, unfortunately, have characterized our culture and even at times the response of self-proclaimed Christians far too often.

Jesus says that you and I, deeply influenced by the upside-down kingdom, living counter-culturally and counter-intuitively according to the beatitudes, approaching life from the weak side rather than from the strong side, have a profound influence on our culture. In this way we are salt. We restrain the culture by restraining ourselves.

But we are also light. Verse 14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” As in verse 13, “you” is emphatic “You, my followers and no others, are the light of the world” Light is a universal symbol. In the Bible it most frequently symbolizes purity as opposed to filth, truth or knowledge as opposed to error or ignorance, divine revelation and presence as opposed to silence and separation from God. To say that we are the light is remarkable, since the use of light in the New Testament is mostly about Jesus. John begins his gospel saying “In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” Jesus himself then says “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

And, as Kent Hughes points out, “the foundational fact that Jesus is the light of the world is glorious, but it suggests the equally foundational but inglorious fact that the world is in darkness, . . . a spiritual darkness that dominates the entire world system, and is terrible. But the real horror is that the inhabitants of the earth love it! John tells us, ‘This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.’ It is the reality of the world’s darkness that makes Jesus’ pronouncement so thrilling. . . . We are the light of the world! To say such a thing about ourselves without divine sanction would be the height of arrogance. But Jesus said it.”

How then can we be the world’s light? There is only one answer. We have no light in our selves. We must transmit or reflect the light of Jesus. Just as an optical fiber channels light into a dark space, just as a mirror reflects light into a room, just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so we, having no inherent light of our own, reflect and transmit the light of Jesus that is in us by his grace and salvation into a world desperately in need of the light of grace and salvation. Paul says “at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹(for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true).” “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” You and I are to reflect the light of Jesus.

That this is our duty is emphasized by Jesus’ expansion of the thought. He says that a city on a hill cannot be hidden. In the day the white villages of Palestine reflect the sun far over the land. And at night? You may recall that Jesus announced himself as the light of the world in Jerusalem on the day after the feast of lights. On the last day of that feast four massive golden candelabra were lit on the temple walls. The gigantic flames lit up not only the temple but all of Jerusalem, the archetypal city on a hill of Scripture.

Now, Jesus says, you are a city on a hill proclaiming God's presence. Verse 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." What is the use of a lamp if it's hidden away? You don't put a table lamp on the floor of the closet or in one of the kitchen cabinets. You put it on a table and thus it fills the room with light. The upside-down kingdom and the blessings of weakness, seen in the lives of the king's subjects are a witness to the king. Therefore we must avoid the temptation of withdrawal, of hiding the light this sin-darkened world needs. "Flight into the invisible is a denial of the call," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said. "A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow him"

Verse 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." Jesus drives the metaphor home. What his disciples must show is "good works." When they do people and cultures will see this light. What are these "good works," Jesus calls us to? Stott says "It seems that 'good works' is a general expression to cover everything a Christian says and does because he is a Christian, every outward and visible manifestation of his Christian faith." Kent Hughes says "The word, kalos, carries the idea of attractiveness or beauty, rather than the more common agathos, which means good in quality. Jesus wants our light to shine through beautiful, attractive works! He is not recommending self-conscious, staged works. Yet he implies that we should let them be beautiful."

"Since light is a common biblical symbol of truth," Stott says, "a Christian's shining light must also include his spoken testimony. . . . Evangelism must be counted as a 'good work' by which our light shines and our Father is glorified." "We must not limit it to this, however. 'Good works' are works of love as well as of faith. They express not only our loyalty to God, but our care for [others]. Indeed, the primary meaning of 'works' must be practical, visible deeds of compassion." When people see these they glorify God. Good works embody the good news of his love which we proclaim. Or, as Kat Welch always says "If you love on someone long enough they will eventually as you why."

What does it look like to be salt and light in our culture in 2021 AD? Let me give a few practical suggestions for ways to combat the decay of culture and reveal the love and truth of Jesus. The placement of this teaching immediately after the Beatitudes reminds us that our practices need to grow from those weak side approaches, not from any kind of arrogance, bombast, coercion or self-righteousness. Instead let your salt and light flow from meekness, from hunger for righteousness, from mercy, from peacemaking, and from a pure heart. Pray especially for sensitivity. There are needs all around us, but we need, you and I need to become aware of the needs before we will begin to meet them.

Let me suggest three levels of salty salt and lighty light. First, start in the family and the church. Meet the needs of the people immediately around you and lovingly restrain the excesses and characteristic sins of those immediately around you as well. Shine love into people's darkness by sacrificial care. Especially in the church: bring the meal; provide the babysitting; listen to the concerns; pray for the needs; offer the help. And even if all the people we're caring for are already believers, this is still good work that people can see and glorify God. Jesus said that as we love one another all men will know that we are disciples.

Second, go local. Last year Todd and I ran across a resource called "The Art of Neighboring," which makes the outlandish claim that when Jesus said "love your neighbor" he meant love the people who live near you, even the people in the next house over or across the street. We hope that as many small groups as possible will do the "Art of Neighboring" video series this year as we come out of COVID isolation. But it's extremely practical stuff. Don't be ashamed to ask your neighbor his name. Don't be afraid to borrow something. Don't spend all your time in the house or in the backyard, but inhabit the front yard a bit. Invite people into your home, or your front yard, or your cul-de-sac to get to know each other. Be sensitive to needs. Help single moms with household repairs, or babysitting, or sharing a meal. Give a neighbor a ride to AutoZone when they are working on their car. Work together on outdoor maintenance. Recently I tried this by working with my neighbor to rebuild a section of our mutual fence. But it's tough in our culture. I had only limited success because our schedules were completely different. We need to keep trying, if not in our immediate neighborhood at least with those in need in our local community, through volunteering at a food bank, as several were doing before COVID, or at a school or hospital or community pregnancy center.

That leads to my third suggestion: get a cause. Do you know what I mean by this? Christians who band together to address a problem or meet a need make a huge difference in the culture, and bring glory to God. That's what Keller's talk is really focused on, the marvelous good Christianity has done over the centuries in shaping Western culture: good that we now, in many ways, lament the loss of. As individuals and as families we can join with others to address issues. We've had some people involved in organizations that fight human slavery and trafficking. We've had people who've helped address the abortion issue by volunteering and supporting community pregnancy centers. We've had many people involved directly in foster care and adoption, or in supporting those who do these things. Some have advocated for kids as CASA workers. And of course, over the last three years we've had the opportunity to be directly involved in the lives of homeowners through ReachGlobal Crisis response. Some of us want to continue being a resource even in Lake Charles.

John Stott summarizes this way “You and only you are the earth’s salt and the world’s light. And therefore - the condition follows with inexorable logic - you simply must not fail the world you are called to serve. You must be what you are. You are salt, and so you must retain your saltiness and not lose your Christian tang. You are light, and so you must let your light shine and not conceal it, whether by sin or by compromise, by laziness or by fear.”

I’d like to close with a somewhat more extended excerpt from Tim Keller’s talk. He’s just finished sketching some of the benefits Western culture and British society has reaped from the presence of Christianity, and in the process given a brilliant presentation of the now, as he closes his comes back to the subject of salt: “Look, last point. Simple last point. Jesus’s metaphor is that Christians can be salt as long as they, as long as they’re salt, meaning not the same as the meat. They’re different and therefore Christians will not, interestingly, benefit society if they’re just like everybody else in society. We’re not going to benefit a society filled with self-actualizers unless we really are different, unless we do believe Jesus died for us. Unless we do believe that we live through the self-sacrifice of the great, the great Jesus Christ, and therefore we’re going to live by self-sacrifice. See unless we are shaped deeply by that that we’re really not going to be of any kind of benefit.

Larry Hurtado of the University of Edinburgh has written some books on early Christianity recently and one of his books is called *Why on Earth Would Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries*. He says, as a start, you have to ask that question because Christians were the most persecuted of any religion. So why would you become a Christian at a time in which there was no social benefit to you, no social benefit at all. . . Why? Offered two things, Hurtado says. One is communion with God. Not just favor of the gods but a love relationship with God through the free gift of eternal life. Every other religion you have to earn, you have to work hard you have to be a good person. Christianity said no, no. Christ has gone to the cross and through his sacrifice has procured your salvation. So if you believe in him his death and his resurrection you get forgiveness now, and there it is. To say “in myself I’m unworthy but in Christ I’m absolutely loved perfectly infallibly without condemnation because of his sacrifice.” That’s what turns you into a person who can be salt that’s where all those values go that’s where the other-oriented ethic comes from. See that’s where the infinite value of the human soul comes from. Christians, you’re only going to be a benefit to society if you stay different. If you don’t become like the society, self-actualizing. If you stay self-sacrificers and self-givers.

Here's what the British society can do to get the most benefit out of Christians. Not demand that they become like everybody else. Our modern society says we believe in respect for difference. Okay respect Christians differences. But here's what you should do for them, O British society. I guess if there's any place that's talking to British society I guess this is the place to do it. O British society tell Christians be true to your own ideals and critique them on the basis of their ideals. Don't critique them on the basis of somebody else's. Critique them on the basis of their own ideals. How fair that is, but how good that will be. We deserve the critique. How fair that is, but how good that will be for British society and Western society.”

We are here to have an impact. Those who have become counter-cultural upside-down kingdom people through the blessing of God and through embracing weak-side approaches to life can have a supernatural impact on their culture. We can be salt, and prevent decay. We can be light and reveal God's truth and God's love. We are here to have an impact.